

THE PROCESS OF DECENTERING:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF ASIAN AMERICAN BUDDHISTS  
FROM THE FO GUAN SHAN TEMPLE BUDDHIST ORDER

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A Dissertation presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
University of Missouri

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In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by  
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MAY 2009

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To my mother and father, thank you for bringing me into this world.  
I am blessed by your love everyday

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Michael Mobley for his steady guidance in my professional development, and...his infinite patience in helping me accomplish my academic goals throughout the years. I would also like to thank Dr. Anthony Scott, Dr. Nancy Amodei, Dr. Larry Schoenfeld and Mr. Charles Boone for their encouragement and support over the past few years. I am grateful to each of them for investing their time and energy in my professional development. Their guidance has helped me to navigate betwixt and between my student persona and that of a budding professional in my chosen areas of interest. Lastly, I'd like to send a heartfelt thank you to Yi Hung Fa Shi and the participants of this dissertation project. Without their openness and commitment to sharing their life experiences with me, this study would not have been possible.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ..... ii

LIST OF TABLES .....vii

ABSTRACT .....viii

CHAPTER

1. INTRODUCTION ..... 1

2. LITERATURE REVIEW ..... 11

    The Similarities and Differences Between Buddhism and  
    Western Psychotherapy

    The Process of Centering

    The Process of Decentering

    Centering, Decentering and Social Constructions of Selfhood

    Integrating Western Psychotherapy and Buddhism

    The Subcultures of American Buddhism: Asians and Whites

    The Present Study

3. METHOD .....37

    A Philosophical Framework: The Naturalistic Paradigm and  
    its Five Assumptions

    A Tradition of Inquiry: The Phenomenological Approach

    Research Design

*Participants*

*The Researcher as Instrument*  
            *(Self Reflection 1 – Initial Bracketing and Analysis).*

*Assumptions and Biases About the Phenomenon and Interviewees*  
            *(Self-Reflection 2 – Initial Bracketing and Analysis)*

*Steps to Working with Subjectivity and Personal Biases  
(Additional Bracketing and Analysis Throughout the Study)*

*The Study Site*

*Gaining Entry and Developing Rapport*

*Selecting Interviewees*

*Informed Consent and Interview Set-Up*

*Data Collection: In-Depth Phenomenologically-Based Interviewing*

*Recording Information*

*Data Analysis*

*Verification*

*Taking Leave*

4. RESULTS .....62

Participants

Analysis of Data

*An Overview of Clustered Themes (Invariant Constructs)*

*Textural Description*

*Section I: Formative Life Experiences*

*Section II: Turning Towards Buddhist Practice*

*Section III: Buddhist Practice*

*Structural Description*

*Section I: Formative Life Experiences*

*Section II: Turning Towards Buddhist Practice*

*Section III: Buddhist Practice*

*Textural-Structural Composite*

*Section I: Preparing for Buddhist Practice (Conation)*

*Section II: Practice in Action (Morality and Meditation)*

*Section III: Changing from the Inside Out  
(Mechanisms of Change)*

5.	DISCUSSION .....	98
	Conation: Preparing for Buddhist Practice	
	Morality and Meditation: Practice in Action	
	Mechanisms of Change: Changing from the Inside Out	
	New Findings from Current Study	
	Limitations	
	Future Directions	
	Implications	

APPENDIX

1.	SOURCES OF DATA .....	134
2.	RECRUITMENT SCRIPT .....	135
3.	INFORMED CONSENT FORM .....	136
4.	PERSONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET .....	138
5.	INTERVIEW SCHEDULE .....	139
6.	INTERVIEW 1 PROTOCOL: FOCUSED PERSONAL HISTORY .....	140
7.	INTERVIEW 2 PROTOCOL: DETAILS OF PRESENT EXPERIENCE.....	142
8.	INTERVIEW 3 PROTOCOL: REFLECTIONS ON MEANING .....	145
9.	FEEDBACK SESSION PROTOCOL .....	146
10.	EXCERPT OF TRANSCRIBED RAW DATA FOR SMART .....	147

11.	EXCERPT OF TRANSCRIBED RAW DATA FOR MONKEY KING.....	150
12.	EXCERPT OF TRANSCRIBED RAW DATA FOR SUN .....	153
13.	EXCERPT OF TRANSCRIBED RAW DATA FOR UPASIKA .....	155
14.	EXCERPT OF TRANSCRIBED RAW DATA FOR SILENT MONKEY.....	157
15.	EXCERPT OF TRANSCRIBED RAW DATA FOR DRAGON .....	159
	REFERENCES .....	161
	VITA .....	170



## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Seven themes and their clusters of non-repeating significant statements subsumed under 3 major sections .....	65
2. Summary of analyzed results in order of analysis: Themes, textural description, structural description, and texture-structure composite.....	88

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ABSTRACT

The current study is an empirical exploration of the Buddhist phenomenon of decentering (letting go of the ego as described in the **Four Noble Truths**). The researcher explored decentering as a **personal process** of being open to **change** in one's **daily Buddhist practice**, whereby a person learns to be **less attached** to **worldly experiences**, hence reducing suffering that comes with a conditioned mind. A psychological approach underscored by empirical and transcendental phenomenologies was utilized to describe the essence of decentering: 1) criterion sampling to select 6 members of a Buddhist temple in Southwestern United States, 2) in-depth interviewing, and 3) phenomenologically-grounded data analytic techniques. Results showed the process of decentering is a multifaceted experience. It paralleled millennia-old Buddhist training guidelines for achieving decentering: 3-fold training of morality, meditation and wisdom. Conation was an essential component that pervaded the entire process of decentering. Participants gradually reshaped their habitual schema to spiritual schema. Conation served to drive decentering's mechanism of change, metacognition. Participants focused on changing the way they related to their thoughts over time rather than changing the contents of their thoughts. The pursuit of mental well-being through the use of decentering-related interventions has far-reaching implications for clinical research, training and practice.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990's, North American psychology has become increasingly open to exploring the relationship between mental health and religion/spirituality. In fact, several articles about religion and spirituality have been published in mainstream scientific journals within the last two decades. APA also released its first-ever book (Shafrankse, 1996) followed by several other landmark books dealing with religion, spirituality, mental health, and psychotherapy (Miller, 1999; Richards & Bergin, 1997). This interest is largely due to the recognition that greater competency is needed to serve those clients for whom religion and spirituality are intricately intertwined with their sense of well-being, and the need to find alternate ways of coping with human suffering (Richards & Bergin, 2000).

Religious and spiritual competence is also sometimes inextricably related to the need for racial/ ethnic competence. In countries like the United States and Canada, the great influx of immigration for the past few decades shows that sometimes recently arrived immigrants are not only minority members in their race and ethnicity but also in their religious and spiritual affiliation. These immigrants are likely to attempt to adjust to their second homeland through the religious and spiritual practices from their culture of origin (Richards & Bergin, 2000). A racial minority group that fits into this category is immigrant Asian American Buddhists. Overall, it is estimated that there are approximately 3 to 4 million Buddhists in the United States, .5% to 1.5% of the total US population (Baumann, 1997). Immigrant Asian Americans make up a large majority of this population followed by a substantial number of White Americans as the second largest group.

The increasing population of Buddhist practitioners, especially after 1965 when immigration laws were relaxed, reflects a growing interest in Buddhism in the United States. This is also reflected in popular media and by prominent figures of our society. In the mental health field, interest in Buddhist philosophy and practice is particularly appropriate. There's an increasing likelihood that mental health professionals, most of who are trained in Western psychotherapies, will encounter and serve racial minority members, especially Asian Americans with Buddhist backgrounds in a variety of settings.

However, the experiences of racial minority American Buddhists, especially Asian Americans who make up the largest group of Buddhists in the US, are rarely addressed in academic literature of American Buddhism. In fact, a number of racial minority authors (Imamura, 1998; Lin, 1996) have observed that scholarly Buddhist literature in the US especially from departments of religious studies, although increasing, does not usually explore the experiences of Asian American Buddhists. In the field of psychology, the body of scholarly work related to Buddhism, with implications for mental health practice, is even scarcer, regardless of whom the researcher or the study participant is. The existing works often focus on explicating a variety of Buddhist processes from an anecdotal and/or theoretical framework (especially from a psychoanalytic perspective). Furthermore, empirical literature in Buddhist psychology is nearly non-existent. The few empirical studies that I found used either a qualitative or quantitative approach, and tended to be outcome-oriented. The studies were primarily interested in ascertaining whether a Buddhist-oriented intervention (i.e., meditation, breathing exercises, religious retreats), on its own or in contrast to other interventions was beneficial or not. As one can see, the study of Buddhist psychology in North

America is a fairly new endeavor, and understandably, the conceptual literature is far more advanced than the empirical literature.

I believe current academic literature on American Buddhism and Buddhist psychology will be enriched by empirical investigations that are process-oriented and focus on the experiences of racial minority members, in particular those of Asian Americans. This type of systematic research will not only provide empirical evidence for the existence of concepts found in Buddhist psychology, but will also provide an opportunity to explore in-depth said concepts. The ensuing understanding has the potential to diversify mental health practices such as mindfulness interventions for American Buddhists of any racial background and for mental health consumers in general. More broadly, this type of research is an exercise in social action: it brings to the visible foreground the voices of racial minority members, integrating their experiences to the broader culture of American Buddhism and to the American landscape of many cultures. To pursue these convictions, I would like to make a literary contribution by studying in-depth a major concept in Buddhist psychology. **Specifically, I am interested in the Buddhist process of decentering, or simply put, how does one let go of their ego/worldly attachments?** I am interested in studying this phenomenon for a select number of racial minority members, who are also formal Buddhist practitioners. I am interested in answering the question, “What is the essential meaning of the experience of decentering for these practitioners?”

The term decentering is often used to contrast with the process of centering in selfhood, as discussed in Western psychology. Decentering is also mentioned as an important process experienced through the practice of the Four Noble Truths, central

principles in Buddhist philosophy and practice. Generally speaking, the processes of centering and decentering are often mentioned to explore how Western and Buddhist psychologies respectively, can be integrated. These integration efforts are driven by similarities that both centering and decentering share (Levine, 2000). The most important similarity between these processes seems to be the promotion of a transformed self with an optimal sense of well-being (Rubin, 1996). This similarity has far reaching implications in that it each process can provide for the other what it's missing and vice versa, creating a complementary whole.

The present study will focus on the process of decentering not centering. Having said this, I also believe a better understanding for the process of decentering can be achieved by bringing to the foreground some well-established, cross-cultural knowledge about Western and Eastern selfhoods. The differentiating characteristics of a selfhood constructed in Western culture versus one constructed in Eastern culture underlie and are compatible with the processes of centering and decentering, respectively. The process of centering from Western psychology (and psychotherapies) is driven at the core by its own social construction of a healthy self. The emphasis is on an independent self supported by an individualistic-oriented culture. This self, like an enduring (or permanent) ego (Rubin, 1996), is stable, assumed to be complete, and views interpersonal relationships as adversarial, competing with individual needs (Heine, 2001). Thus, the process of centering helps to reinforce this type of selfhood. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this self or ego is comprised and reinforced by two domains (Welwood, 2000). The functional ego is a transitional mental structure that organizes our internal functioning of the psyche and our external functioning in the world. It is a temporary tool that helps us

to survive and self-protect. During our childhoods, the functional ego provides us with feelings of security and stability. The self-representational ego, on the other hand, synthesizes a self-concept that is comprised of many constructions of the self. This ego is gradually constructed since infancy through interactions with our caretakers, and we experience it as continuous and familiar. The benefit for constructing an enduring self or “centering” is that it can help one to control impulses, to develop self-esteem, and to be functionally competent, all of which helps a person to feel normal and experience relative happiness in the social environments that they belong to.

Meanwhile, the process of decentering is compatible with a socially-constructed interdependent self prevalent in collectivist-oriented cultures of the East (Heine, 2001). This self is concerned with staying connected to members of the in-group by fulfilling obligations attached to its many roles. It is also concerned with being situationally flexible in order to foster harmony and maintain a socially acceptable public image. This connectedness is not just a mere relationship, it is the social existence that defines the self as stressed by Confucian philosophy: one loses meaning when there are no others (Ho, 1995). The development of an interdependent self is similar to the “no-self” or “no-ego” developed through decentering, as practiced in Buddhism. Decentering to a no-self is concerned with healthiness that arises when one **detaches from self or ego**. This process is often misunderstood as complete loss of the ego. Rather, it is more accurate to describe the detachment as being able to see around the edges of the illusory ego (Imamura, 1998). That is, our perceptions are no longer distorted and we see ourselves with a mirror-like reflection. As one continues to decenter, the illusory ego is no longer, and the self

expands to the greater matrix of the Self where one experiences a positive emptiness, openness and connectedness (Epstein, 2000; Imamura, 1998).

The most central doctrines of Buddhist teachings, the **Four Noble Truths**, can be likened to a doctor's prescription of how one can decenter from one's ego or the **conditioned mind**. Movement through each Noble Truth, as represented by symptom, diagnosis, prognosis and treatment, respectively, helps one **progress from suffering to non-suffering** (Finn & Rubin, 2000). The First Truth states that suffering is inevitable in life and is described by three types of suffering (symptom): **ordinary suffering, fear of change**, and a uniquely Buddhist concept, the **suffering that arises from a conditioned mind** (or the illusory ego). The construction of the conditioned mind is reinforced by an on-going interaction between appraisal of the senses and a reaction of positivity, negativity or neutrality towards the senses (Engler, 1998). It is within this conditioned mind (diagnosis) that the **causes of suffering, desire, attachment and craving** of the Second Noble Truth are sheltered. Decentering occurs as one **gradually unlinks** the seemingly automatic interaction between appraisal of and reaction to the senses. The Third Noble Truth is realizing it's possible to achieve Nirvana and end suffering as one awakens (prognosis). This is followed by the Fourth Noble Truth, which shows how to treat suffering and reach enlightenment through the 8-Fold Path (or the 3 Trainings).

As mentioned earlier, theoretical understanding of concepts in Buddhist psychology is ahead of empirically-based work. Specifically, conceptual frameworks have been created in an effort to integrate Western and Buddhist psychologies through the processes of centering and decentering. Engler's (1984) classic developmental model demonstrated this integration. This was then followed by Rubin's (1996)



extension of the model from a contextual perspective. First, Engler's (1984) model basically suggests that Western psychology (or psychotherapies) are concerned with lower-order processes such as centering, whereas Buddhist psychology (or practice) is associated with higher-order processes such as decentering in one's progression towards self-transformation (Engler, 1984). This framework of thinking highlights the presently challenged, informal rule that one should seek psychological therapy before embarking on a spiritual quest (Spayde, 2001).

Rubin (1996), in his extension of Engler's model, agrees that a coherent self is a necessary precondition to the eventual dismantling of the ego. However, he argues that the judgment value placed in labeling the Western process of centering as lower-order versus the Buddhist decentering process as higher-order is incorrect (Rubin, 1996). Instead, Rubin (1996) contends that Western and Buddhist processes, and subsequently culturally derived selves, must be understood for their own merit from a contextual perspective. The aim is to truly integrate these processes in a complementary manner. Rubin (1996) goes further by using his contextual model to highlight the deficiencies of centering and decentering, depending on context. For Western psychologies, the individualistic-oriented personality theories promote an excessive self-centeredness that depersonalizes others and a morality that is not an adequate framework for ethics. For Buddhism, the belief in a no-self inhibits criticism when criticism is warranted such as lack of self-responsibility. For example, the guise of decenteredness or positive emptiness provides some spiritual teachers the opportunity to abuse their power on their students and their communities.

Further explorations of Rubin's (1996) extended model, especially empirical ones, are worthwhile endeavors. This type of work has the potential to create more openness to different frameworks of healing and to create greater cohesiveness between diverse practices in mental health. For example, integration of centering and decentering processes can be studied through the concept of acculturation for Asian American Buddhists. As immigrant Asian American Buddhists continue to preserve aspects of their culture of origin, and to acculturate and assimilate to their new American host culture, they are likely to increasingly experience internal and external tension while attempting to construct a racial/ethnic/religious identity in the landscape that is called American Buddhism and the United States. This tension may involve an on-going vacillation between centering and decentering processes, surrounded by experiences of powerlessness where racial/religious minority members have limited capacities to exercise their powers in comparison to members of the dominant group. In studying these experiences, practitioners can gain a better understanding of the inner worlds of their clients and help clients to develop innovative ways of coping.

However, the empirical investigation of how centering and decentering can be integrated through the process of acculturation is beyond the scope of this study. Empirical research in Buddhist psychology is simply not substantial enough to begin exploring the question of how integration between Buddhist and Western psychologies can occur. Therefore, the present study is intended to be an in-depth, exploratory investigation that will, **one**, begin to bring forth the voices of racial minority American Buddhists, and **two**, the investigation will focus on the meaning participants ascribe to their experience of decentering through Buddhist practice.

Although I have not received any formal training in the teachings and practice of Buddhism, I have come to understand that the phenomenon of decentering itself has multiple meanings, different topical areas of emphasis, some more process-oriented and others more outcome-oriented. This personal understanding has implications for how the process of decentering will be operationalized in this study (addresses the second objective mentioned in the previous paragraph). The topical area could be on enlightenment or becoming enlightened; end of or ending suffering; being compassionate or becoming compassionate; detachment or detaching (letting go) from worldly experiences (i.e. both material and immaterial experiences such as emotions); decentering as explained through the Four Noble Truths; egolessness, emptiness and no self, or becoming empty, etc. The phenomenon can be acted out in different ways, too: meditation, chanting, attending dharma lectures, volunteer work, socializing with other Buddhists, formal versus informal practice, just to name a number of Buddhist practices.

For the study, I am interested in understanding the phenomenon of decentering as a **personal process** where one is open to **change**, practicing to be **less attached** to **worldly experiences**, such as how one handles **emotions** or how one engages in **relationships through time**. The process has the potential to help one see beyond the **conditioned mind** and reduce **suffering** in life. I am also interested in choosing interviewees from a pool of racial minority American Buddhists in the Fo Guan Shan Temple Buddhist Order for many reasons. The Order was originally created in 1967 by the charismatic figurehead, Master Hsin Yun, in Taiwan. In the United States, the Order is committed to playing an active role in American Buddhism, and has many racial minority American Buddhists, especially Asian Americans. It is widely recognized as

one of the largest Chinese American Buddhist organizations in the United States. In fact, the North American headquarters for the Order is housed within Hsi Lai Temple, Hsi Lai meaning “coming to the West” in Chinese. Hsi Lai Temple is an impressive monastic compound considered to be the largest Buddhist monastery in the Western hemisphere (Prebish, 1999). Moreover, the Order is well-established internationally through a number of organizational structures, including an extensive network of lay members engaged in formal Buddhist practice. Thus, there exists a well-organized hierarchy of both practitioners such as nuns and monks and lay practitioners who have been formally inducted into the Order.

Methodologically, I used a psychological approach consisting of empirical and transcendental phenomenologies to describe the phenomenon of decentering. Interviewees were chosen from a targeted Fo Guan Shan branch temple in Texas. Following a phenomenological methodology, a select number of interviewees were identified through criterion sampling. Interviewees participated in in-depth phenomenological interviews. This interview format was chosen to assist interviewees in constructing meaning to their experience with the phenomenon of decentering. Finally, data was analyzed both for myself (the researcher) and the interviewees, so as to create a rich description that highlights the essence of the experience of decentering.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Buddhism in America has experienced tremendous growth in the last half of the twentieth century. In just examining popular media, Buddhism has become more visible through a variety of venues: prominent articles about Buddhism in mainstream print media including the Wall Street Journal and Newsweek; the mere presence of famous Americans like Richard Gere, a student of the Dalai Lama, who validate Buddhist practice; and features on mainstream television shows such as ABC Nightly News with Peter Jennings. The growing interest in Buddhism is also apparent in American academia where two decades ago there was only a dearth of scholarly literature available, but now there is a modest growth of important new writings using critical, analytical and historical perspectives (Gregory, 2001; Prebish, 1999). In addition, as of 1994 there were at least two full-time faculty members present in the discipline of Buddhist Studies in approximately two-dozen North American universities, and about 150 Buddhist scholars in North America, most of whom are scholar-practitioners (Prebish, 1998). Lastly, the exponential growth of Buddhism in the last three decades is most apparent in the proliferation of centers dedicated to Buddhist practice (Gregory, 2001). In fact, Morreale (1998) listed 1,062 Buddhist meditation centers in North America.

Presently in the United States, it is estimated that there are approximately 3 to 4 million Buddhists, constituting .5 to 1.5 percent of the total US population (Baumann, 1997). However, Peter Jennings's researchers estimate the population to be anywhere between four to six million, making this religious movement significantly larger than many Protestant denominations (Prebish, 1998). Using the more conservative figures provided by Baumann (1997), it is further estimated that most Buddhists in the United

States are racial minorities of Asian ancestry (Prebish, 1999) who immigrated to the United States after 1965 when strict exclusionary immigration laws were lifted. These immigrants often practice the type of Buddhism that is from their culture of origin and usually in the language of that culture (Finn & Rubin, 2000). This figure seems to correspond with the increase of Asian Pacific American (APA) population from less than 1 million in 1960 to more than 7 million in 1990, making the APA's the fastest growing racial community in the United States (Lee, 1997). In addition, there has been a great increase of international students in the last 3 decades from 50,000 in 1960 to 419,585 in 1992 with Asian students taking up 51% of this population, accounting for 9% of total growth in international student enrollment (Ojano Sheehan & Pearson, 1995). The second largest group of Buddhists on the other hand is smaller, though substantial, and consists of around 800,000 White Americans (Prebish, 1999). It is believed that many of these White Americans, who are also middle-class, converted to Buddhism during the countercultural revolution of the sixties and have the most contact with Western psychotherapy (Finn & Rubin, 2000; Prebish 1999).

This evidence about Buddhism's presence in North America clearly shows that as a religion, form of spirituality and/or lifestyle, it has taken root in American soil. Major issues of concern have also arisen, especially as addressed by academicians from university departments of religious studies. Currently, there are two major issues of concern, ethnicity and practice, that when combined asks an often-debated question: "How possible is it to integrate Buddhism and Western psychotherapy, in particular the processes of centering and decentering?" This is an important question with strong implications for mental health research, training and practice. However, with the present

state of academic literature, I do not believe it is possible to explore this question empirically. The integration of processes found in Western and Buddhist psychologies is a complex process in itself, and has yet to be grounded by more empirical research and not just anecdotal and theoretical conceptualizations.

Two academic fields have begun to explore the integration of processes found in Western and Buddhist psychologies. In the field of religious studies, much of the effort at integrating Western psychotherapy with Buddhist psychology has been written by White Americans geared for White Americans. There is nearly no racial minority American Buddhist, especially Asian American, perspective available about this integrative phenomenon (Imamura, 1998; Lin, 1996). For now, this is not surprising since Asian American Buddhists have for the most part shown very little interest in Western psychotherapy (Imamura, 1998). However, this may change as immigrant Asian American populations become more acculturated and assimilated to individualistic-oriented practices of the American culture.

In addition to the dearth of literature concerning the experiences of racial minority American Buddhists from the field of religious studies, most of the academic literature to date from the field of Buddhist psychology is from an anecdotal and/or theoretical perspective. Discussions of conceptual frameworks are far ahead of any empirically-based studies. Irrespective of whom the researchers and participants are, empirical literature in Buddhist psychology is almost non-existent. For example, a recent PsycInfo search using the keywords Buddhists and Buddhism, limited by qualifiers of peer-reviewed journals and empirical studies produced 66 references. Most studies involved a case study or a survey study design, and questioned the benefits of Buddhist practice to

one's well-being. Other studies include neurobiological investigations exploring the practice of meditation and deep breathing, techniques commonly found in Buddhist practice.

Although I believe the issue of integration cannot be properly addressed based on what is available in the current academic literature, I do believe that initial steps should be taken for creating a knowledge base so that the question of how Western and Buddhist psychologies are to be integrated can be adequately addressed in the future. A potential research question is "How do the processes of centering and decentering play out when immigrant Asian Americans Buddhists acculturate to their new host country?" This question is beyond the scope of this study, and the purpose of this study is to begin building a foundation for future investigations. I want to empirically explore the experience of decentering (not centering) or simply the process of letting go of ego/worldly attachments for racial minority American Buddhists. I am particularly interested in the experiences of Asian Americans, again because they make up the largest group of Buddhist practitioners in the United States, and oftentimes their experiences are not addressed in a process-oriented manner in the existing mental-health-related academic literature.

My research question for the present study is "What is the essential meaning for the phenomenon of decentering for a select group of racial minority American Buddhists?" That is, I want to attempt to provide rich descriptions of what it looks like when practitioners engage in decentering, in letting go, and how do they do it. Before expanding further on the importance of this scientific endeavor, I would like to first note that I use the term decentering throughout this study more for the sake of maintaining



consistency with academic literature and within this study. However, this by no means indicates that everyone would understand this term or even attach positive connotations to it.

I believe this is an important investigation for various reasons. One, it is an opportunity to continue substantiating basic concepts found in Buddhist psychology before conducting any integration efforts. It is also an opportunity to lend credibility to these basic concepts through rigorous and credible empirical research in the field of psychology. Two, an in-depth investigation exploring a primary Buddhist concept has the potential to help clinicians gain a better understanding of Buddhists who seek mental health services. Moreover, results from such investigations has the potential to create innovative forms of healing for mental health consumers from any background, and can create an impetus for clinicians to diversify their repertoire of therapeutic techniques. Lastly, my interest in the experiences of racial minority American Buddhists is driven on a broader level by research that is grounded in social action. This study is an attempt to bring to the foreground the voices of racial minority American Buddhists. It is an assertion that their voices are part of the American Buddhist culture and the overall American culture. Their experiences are an integral part of the broader culture and sustain its liveliness.

In this study, I proposed to investigate specific aspects of the process of decentering. Mainly, decentering defined as a **personal process**, of being open to **change**, learning to be **less attached to worldly experiences** (with emphasis on **emotional regulation** and **relational engagement**), and moving beyond the **conditioned mind** to reduce human **suffering** (Avants & Margolin, 2004; Wallace & Shapiro, 2006).

I used a psychological approach comprised of empirical and transcendental phenomenologies, to attempt to describe in-depth the meanings that a select number of racial minority American Buddhists ascribe to their experience of decentering or letting go of their worldly attachments. Specifically, I used phenomenologically-oriented methods for sampling, data collection and data analysis. At this point, I refer the reader to Chapter 3: Method, for an extensive description of the phenomenological philosophy and methodology used in this study.

Although the empirical focus of the present study will be on decentering for a select group of racial minority American Buddhists, the reader will also be exposed to more in-depth discussions of centering and integration of centering and decentering. My intention is to provide a literature background for conducting process-oriented research using Buddhist concepts. Furthermore, the background literature serves as a guiding light for where the present study may eventually end up with additional empirical investigations. For the remainder of this chapter, I will create a space to first talk about the impetus for integrating Western psychotherapy and Buddhism by highlighting their similarities and differences. Second, the process of centering in Western psychology and the process of decentering in Buddhism will be explicated by what each process defines as healthy mental well-being. Third, I will then bring forth the underlying cultural frameworks that support the processes of centering and decentering in their host cultures. Fourth, the integration of Western psychotherapy and Buddhism expressed through centering and decentering will be demonstrated by Engler's (1984) classic model, where centering is perceived as a first-order process and decentering as a second-order process. An extension of this model will also be discussed using real-life applications. Next, I

will touch briefly on the issue of conducting research driven by social action, before elaborating on characteristics of the study site where participants were recruited.

#### The Similarities and Differences Between Buddhism and Western Psychotherapy

In the last twenty years, there has been a growing interest for the integration of Western psychotherapy and Buddhism. This desire was probably propelled by the similarities these two non-theistic processes share. There are six major similarities between Western psychotherapy and Buddhism (Levine, 2000): 1) both are concerned with alleviating suffering; 2) both are humanistic and secular; 3) both perceive human activities as grounded in a causal framework and in particular Buddhism where activities are driven by cravings produced by our biology and beliefs; 4) both encourage the practice of compassion, concern and unconditional positive regard toward all beings; 5) both promote the ideal of transformation to achieve an optimal sense of well-being characterized by greater self-possession, greater equanimity to loss, diminished cravings, and less impulsivity and attachment; and 6) both recognize that the mind functions at superficial and deeper levels.

The last two similarities may be particularly helpful in creating more integration between Western psychotherapy and Buddhism (Rubin, 1996). With regard to the fifth similarity, both Western psychotherapy and Buddhism attend to what the other is missing and consequently complement one another as a whole in transforming the self. For example, Western psychotherapy cultivates active qualities such as investigation of mind and human conduct whereas Buddhism cultivates tranquilizing qualities such as concentration and equanimity. The sixth similarity, recognizing that there are different levels of functioning in the mind, is related to what the Russian mystic Gurdjieff

observed: most humans are not aware of their experiences (as cited in Rubin, 1996).

Western psychotherapy and Buddhism can address this unconscious living by cultivating attentiveness and awareness in our daily living.

In recent times, there are those who believe in fully integrating Western psychotherapy and Buddhist practice. Some of these experts have manifested these beliefs by engaging in dual role relationships: the therapist is also a spiritual teacher to a client who is also a student (Spayde, 2001). However, there are also those who are more inclined to oppose or are fully opposed to the integration of Western psychotherapy and Buddhism. Aside from the ethical issue of dual role relationships, there are those experts who believe that Buddhism is not compatible with Western psychotherapy especially when the goal in Buddhism is to do away with the self (Rubin, 1996, Spayde, 2001). Furthermore, in Buddhism like in many other spiritual traditions, there exists an informal rule that highlights this incompatibility: one is not encouraged to seek a spiritual path unless therapy is first sought (Spayde, 2001).

The contention is understandable because at a fundamental level, Western psychotherapy and Buddhism have different conceptualizations of selfhood, subsequently affecting their conceptualizations of mental health. Briefly stated, western psychotherapy recognizes a healthy self is achieved when integration of the ego is increased or there is greater coherence to one's sense of self. This is sometimes referred to as the process of centering (Engler, 1998). Buddhist practice, on the other hand, is concerned with the process of decentering, and involves transcending one's attachment to a mentally constructed and conditioned idea of ego self which is also associated with boundaries that imprison a person (Engler, 1998). To better understand this difference in

the construction of healthy selfhoods between Western psychotherapy and Buddhism, the processes of centering and decentering will be discussed in more detail in the following two sections.

### The Process of Centering

The assumptions of a healthy self in Western psychotherapy, across all schools of thought, are the existence of an enduring self, and the inherent importance of fortifying this self (Rubin, 1996). These assumptions demonstrate that the individual self is sacred with its own rights and obligations and that society is of secondary importance (Roland, 1995). Health from this perspective would then view the lack of a sense of self as pathological. As noted by Engler (1986) from a Western perspective, some of the most severe clinical disorders such as infantile autism, symbiotic and functional psychoses and borderline conditions are the result of failures in building a cohesive and integrated self-concept.

What is this ego then? From a psychoanalytic perspective, the ego consists of two domains: the functional ego and the self-representational ego (Welwood, 2000). The functional ego is a transitional mental structure that attempts to effectively organize the internal functioning of the psyche and the external functioning of the world. It is a temporary tool developed to help us survive and self-protect especially as children when we are yet learning how to find our ways in the external world. The functional ego helps a developing child believe that the I is in control, and because of this he or she is provided with feelings of security and stability. The self-representational ego, on the other hand, synthesizes a self-concept comprised of many constructions of the self and it is not something that we can experience directly. This is the self that is experienced as

continuous and familiar. From an object relations perspective, the consistency of this self is gradually constructed since infancy through interactions with caretakers. That is, the infant is continuously internalizing and identifying with their caretakers to form self-representations as part of larger self.

Presumably, the benefit for having an ego or being centered, and thus a benefit of Western psychotherapy, is that it helps the client to construct a self-representation that is able to control their impulses, have self-esteem and be functionally competent. All of these qualities facilitate feelings of relative happiness (Imamura, 1998; Welwood, 2000). Thus, being in control, having self-esteem and being competent are of paramount importance, and are often manifested through these signs: being clear and rational, being physically healthy, having material comfort, following the laws of society, being productive at work, fulfilling one's life goals, having good relationships and living for a long time. Despite this emphasis to fulfill oneself and the secondary importance of society, it is important to note that the main goal of centering in Western psychotherapy still remains that of helping an individual adjust to society successfully as demonstrated by some of the aforementioned signs, and thus Western psychotherapy is inherently socially oriented (Corsini, 1995; Imamura, 1998). The therapist contributes to this goal by aligning themselves with conventional social norms in order to facilitate normal functioning in their clients (Ramaswami & Sheikh, 1989; Szasz, 1994).

The process of centering is oftentimes facilitated through talk in Western psychotherapy with intellect and reason as basic tools to help the client analyze their experiences for self-understanding and transformation (Ramaswami & Sheikh, 1989; Rubin, 1996). For example in psychoanalysis, the process of centering begins when one

is asked to free associate. This exercise helps the speaker to begin understanding who they are as an individual, especially when they begin to connect in a linear pattern with their early life experiences (Rubin, 1996). It is understood that by talking “out loud” the client can potentially change their abnormal attitudes and behaviors to normal ones.

Following this description of centeredness and what is viewed as healthy in Western psychotherapy, some therapists trained in western traditions continue to view or believe the process of decentering in Buddhism as unhealthy. In particular, there seems to be a gross misconception that to decenter is to regress to a primitive or infantile developmental stage. In fact, the achievement of nirvana was mistakenly described by Freud himself as the longing to return to the oceanic consciousness of the womb (Imamura, 1998). Thus, the following description of decentering is provided to begin elucidating the healthy selfhood as is construed in Buddhism for the purposes of this study, but to also redress some of the aforementioned misconceptions.

### The Process of Decentering

Decentering in Buddhism is not a mere loss of ego strength or the conventionally constructed ego as if often misunderstood in the West (Imamura, 1998; Welwood, 2000). Rather, decentering has been described as not being centered in thinking, not being attached to a reactive self and being able to see around the edges of the illusory constructed ego when one is enlightened (Epstein, 2000). In essence, this transcendental process reveals that the ego self is an illusion whether it's functional or self-representational, and is basically a mental representation constructed to defend against the fear of nonexistence. When decentering is continuously practiced without relying in an external, unquestioned God, the conception of self is no longer confined to just the

illusory ego self, rather self expands to the greater matrix of Self (Imamura, 1998).

Thus, decentering helps one to experience a sense of self that is altered, where the mind is no longer attached to aspects of the mind-body process, but rather transcends them (Epstein, 2000). What Imamura means by the “greater matrix of Self” is that self is no longer confined to that of an enduring self with its own identity such as when we say “my personality.” The word “me” is not just me, everything about oneself becomes a part of a greater experiential matrix. In other words, a decentered individual is more likely to expand (or transcend) beyond a traditional Western definition of self because they see themselves as intrinsically part and parcel of something greater than themselves. The result is a self that’s more aware of how we all “cause and effect” one another in our thoughts and actions. Similarly, an understanding of how we are all connected allows one to experience no-self or emptiness. This is because we are defined by our impingements on others and vice versa. In this sense, there is no such thing as a true self. Another result is an unforced positive emptiness, which relaxes one’s defensiveness against being open, and fostering feelings of connectedness with oneself, others and the world (Epstein, 2000).

The process of decentering, specifically the decentering of a conditioned mind, can be further understood by examining the Four Noble Truths, the most central principles of Buddhism. The Four Noble Truths is a system of Buddhist doctrines that addresses the experience of human suffering by categorizing it into symptom, diagnosis, prognosis and treatment (Finn & Rubin, 2000). According to the First Noble Truth, suffering is unavoidable in life and there are three types of it. The first being ordinary suffering is often described as existential dissatisfaction with life and include dealing



with inevitable life events such as aging, sickness and death. The second type of suffering comes from fearing changes as they could potentially result in negative outcomes, creating displeasure and disturbing our sense of happiness. The last type of suffering is uniquely Buddhist in that the conditioned mind enslaves us to our attachments whether they are for material and/or non-material objects.

What is this conditioned mind? Using a psychoanalytic perspective, the Mind consists of two interactive components (Engler, 1998; Finn & Rubin, 2000): 1) a “hedonic appraisal” or consciousness of one or more of the five senses, sight, hearing, taste, touch and scent, plus the sixth one, thinking, and 2) this appraisal is followed by a “felt action tendency” or a reaction of positivity, negativity or neutrality towards any of the six senses mentioned. This conditioned mind is the overall structure that shelters the causes of suffering which is the Second Noble Truth. The causes are desire (desire for sense gratification, existence or non-existence and clinging to self), attachment and craving. Suffering, thus, arises and is perpetuated when one is chained to these causes and has difficulty acknowledging the impermanence of all things. End of suffering is possible when one unlinks the interactive components through moment-to-moment experiencing with equanimity and not discriminating between pain or pleasure. The Third Noble Truth is the achievement of Nirvana, meaning to “blow out” or “to extinguish,” where suffering is ended and one is left with a positive emptiness that both liberates and awakens. Experiencing this positive emptiness helps one to see beyond all phenomenal distinctions such as duality and relativity (Hsing Yun, 2000). Therefore, the Western concept of a healthy self characterized by stability, predictability and temporal and contextual continuity would be considered an arrested state of development (Finn &

Rubin, 2000; Engler, 1998). In all, self as aforementioned is no longer confined to just the illusory ego self, rather self expands to the greater matrix of Self.

In the last and Fourth Noble Truth, the path to end suffering and reach for enlightenment is expressed by using the Eightfold Path (or the 3 Trainings) and the Six Perfections (Yeung & Lee, 1997). The 3 Trainings include morality, meditation and wisdom. Meditation, a central practice of Buddhism and mentioned almost to the exclusivity of morality and wisdom, is included under the Six Perfections, too. Its main goal is to gradually increase one's openness to the subjective world through microscopic (sometimes labeled as nearsightedness), non-selective and non-judgmental perceptions. This practice can lead to high perceptual acuity and attentiveness, increased control over the conditioned mind, greater insight into the nature of the mind and body, the decrease of suffering, and the cultivation of compassion (Rubin, 1996). In all, the Fourth Noble Truth is a treatment plan that refocuses on the reality of suffering, its causes and importance of practicing the bodhisattva or enlightened way especially by helping others.

Individuals who have reached enlightenment, as mentioned in the Fourth Noble Truth, usually portray an image that is highlighted by a particular way of perceiving, experiencing, and interacting with the world (Groth-Marnat, 1992). Specifically, the enlightened individual is likely to have a non-dualistic view of the world because truth simply emerges and just is like a mirror reflecting everything as is. There will be a sense of emptiness as there is no longer a distinction between dualisms that leads to craving and ultimately suffering. At the same time, the individual is free from dread of experience. He or she does not experience the dualism of being and nonbeing nor the fear of life and death since there is no ego. Timelessness is also evident because the individual lives

completely in the present and flows without grasping any particular time frame. There is spontaneity in the expression of love, wisdom and compassion which are the by-products of letting go. Moreover, the individual acknowledges the importance of humility in terms of accepting the reality that being human means having weaknesses. This understanding helps the individual to be tolerant of others' weaknesses and to have better and less demanding relationships. Lastly, the individual is flexible to changes as they do not cling to life and do not perceive letting go as painful or as a loss.

At this point, I will assume that some readers may still be uncertain about what is meant by the process of decentering to a "no-self," especially for those of us who are deeply entrenched in the discourse of Western psychotherapy. Thus, before explicating the underlying cultural frameworks that support the manifestation of centering in Western psychotherapy and decentering in Buddhism within their respective host cultures, I would like to share some personal thoughts to guide the operationalization of the process of decentering in this study. First to me, decentering is an academic term that emphasizes its contrast with the Western psychology concept of centering in selfhood. One's selfhood through decentering is influenced greatly by the Buddhist principles of **impermanence** and interdependence which are discussed in the Four Noble Truths. In other words, a decentered self does not espouse the idea of an enduring, permanent self separate from others. The decentered self is **fluid** and because it is not purely invested in attaching itself to anything, has **an easier time letting go and not suffer (as much)** from worldly attachments. A word about connotations attached to centering and decentering: I personally don't think there's anything wrong with a centered selfhood, it has its usefulness, but because my study's focus is on decentering NOT centering, I am inclined

to ask questions such as what is helpful or not helpful to one's decentering to glean its essence.

I also found an excerpt that helped me to grasp a glimpse of the affirmativeness and expansiveness of nothingness in no-self. I hope the reader can experience this, too.

“In an unreal green forest you are walking next to the old master. You get to a brook. The master touches your shoulder and you know that he wants you to sit down... He shakes his head and points at a piece of rock floating past: it has been in a fire and half of it black. ‘That piece of cork is your personality,’ the master says. ‘At every turn, at every change of circumstances, at every conflict, defeat or victory, a piece of it crumbles off.’ You look at the piece of cork. Pieces of it detach themselves and disappear. The cork is getting smaller. ‘It is getting smaller,’ you say nervously. ‘Getting smaller all the time.’ The quiet voice of the master is very close... ‘You will lose your name, your body, and your character. Your fear diminishes. If it has to happen, it will happen. Nothing will remain. And nothing will be.’” (van de Wetering, 1975, pp. 21-22).

#### Centering, Decentering and Social Constructions of Selfhood

Thus far, Western psychotherapeutic and Buddhist conceptions of selfhood have been defined through the processes of centering and decentering. However, these conceptions of selfhood are not only encapsulated by their respective processes. The centered self and the decentered self in Western psychotherapy and Buddhism, respectively, are encapsulated at a broader level by the indigenous cultures where Western psychotherapy and Buddhism originated and were developed from, specifically from the cultures of the East and the West. Following this rationale, each process as practiced through Western psychotherapy or Buddhism is more easily achieved in broader cultures that espouse social constructions of selfhood compatible with the goals of these underlying processes. That is, centering seems to be a compatible practice for fostering an independent self that is more prevalent in individualistic-oriented cultures of the West and decentering for fostering the interdependent self more prevalent in

collectivist-oriented cultures of the East. The United States, being a country that probably houses the most extreme form of individualism, is a fertile ground for an independent self (Heine, 2001). The prototypical independent self in the American culture fosters a self that is presumed to be complete and stable, and is an entity who often regards interpersonal relationships as secondary because they compete and interfere with personal needs and goals.

In contrast, the emphasis of the interdependent self is the self in relation to others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). One fosters harmony and maintains a public image by being sensitive to the perspectives of others and being situationally flexible because relationships and social obligations are viewed as natural and valued in comparison to individual needs and wishes (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus & Nisbett, 1998). Manifestations of the interdependent self take on the “receiver” orientation in many Asian cultures where it is important to listen and interpret as opposed to expressing thoughts and feelings confidently and assertively (Singelis & Brown, 1995). Being interdependent is much more than just human development in the social context (Ho, 1995). The Confucian notion of social existence stresses that interdependence defines what it means to be human throughout life’s development: one loses meaning when there are no others (Ho, 1995). There is a belief that the basic unit of survival is the group and not the individual (Paez et al., 1998). Therefore, being perceptive to how others view your group memberships helps one to fulfill the all-important life task of maintaining interconnections or interdependence with others. More specifically, individuals of the in-group are expected to fulfill the duties and obligations pertaining to their social roles (Heine, 2001), and thus, are encouraged to be highly sensitive to the standards set up by

their in-group in order to help preserve and maintain the harmony and success of their in-group (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997).

By contextualizing the processes of centering and decentering and grounding them in their respective cultural frameworks of origin, the stage is set for an attempt to integrate ideals from both Western psychotherapy and Buddhism (well, at least conceptually). Thus, the next section will present a classic model that integrates these two, non-theistic processes of knowing. This will then be followed by an extension of classic model, and its application by addressing problematic issues of excessive self-centeredness in Western psychotherapy and the abuse of power in Buddhism.

#### Integrating Western Psychotherapy and Buddhism

The integration of Western psychotherapy and Buddhism was demonstrated in the classical developmental model created by Engler (1984), and has been further enhanced by Rubin's critique of it (1996). First, Engler (1984) believed that both Western psychotherapy and Buddhism could be integrated through a developmental continuum with psychology attending to the initial stages or first-order processes whereas Buddhism focuses on the latter stages of development. This framework of thinking highlights the presently challenged, informal rule that "you should get your therapeutic work done before embarking on the exalted quest for spiritual attainment" (Spayde, 2001). Engler (1998) seems to take this position as he stated that "the farther reaches of meditation practice require a strong ego in the psychoanalytic sense of the capacity to assimilate, organize, and integrate experience; and a relatively well-integrated sense of self" (pp.117). In fact, past research has shown that the practice of meditation can be quite dangerous for 1) people who decompensate due to psychiatric vulnerabilities and 2)

people with PTSD who may be flooded with vivid reexperiencing of their traumas when there is decreased distraction and support (Finn & Rubin, 2000). This illustrates that sometimes the achievement of no-self can be easily misunderstood when there is a lack of competent guidance at hand. Thus, someone with a compromised self from a psychological perspective runs the risk of increasing their level of anxiety at the very least to increased fragmentation at the very worst.

Rubin (1996) continued to explore Engler's model (1984) by expanding its original formulation. There is consensus that a coherent self encouraged in Western psychotherapy, in particular psychoanalysis, is a necessary precondition to the eventual dismantling of an illusory self. However, he argues that there is a judgment value placed when one begins labeling psychological processes as lower-order and Buddhist processes as higher-order. Rubin (1996) borrowed a perspective from economic theory and observed that by looking at the self as a local, rather than as a global optimum, different selves can be useful in different contexts. Thus, he believes that both the psychologically and Buddhist derived selves have their own functionalities when understood from a contextual perspective where self and no-self interpenetrate one another and are not hierarchically ordered. Rubin (1996) commented that Western psychotherapy and Buddhism can complement one another as mentioned before in this paper. Specifically, Western psychotherapy is useful to assess situations, formulate plans and goals, and choose among potential courses of action, and Buddhism is useful in gaining a greater appreciation for tranquil living.

Thus far, the contextual perspective has been applied by addressing the appropriate use of Western psychotherapy for individuals with compromised selves.

Rubin (1996) went further in the application of his model by stressing the deficiencies of both Western psychotherapy and Buddhism as a way of highlighting how the two processes of knowing can fill the void that the other lacks. In terms of Western psychotherapy, he stated that the overwhelming emphasis on individualistic-oriented theories of personality endorses excessive self-centered views of the self and an incomplete view of relationships and morality. To illustrate this self-centeredness in relationships, the word “object” in object relations psychoanalysis points to a thing not a subject, and because relationships are secondary it allows one to adopt a depersonalized view of others and to relate to others in a narcissistic manner whereby the other is of value when it serves the needs of the self (Buccino, 1993). Morality is also incomplete because a moral system that is rooted in individualism creates a system that continues to neglect the other and is not an adequate framework for ethics. Do individual rights sound familiar here? A therapist will often ask the question, “What do you feel, want or need?” but rarely asks the question “What is right?” since this would involve thinking about our responsibilities to others. Thus, the belief in an autonomous, separate self prevents us from exploring more deeply aspects of self-transcendence and spirituality. All of this in addition to the increasing lack of spirituality in our technocratic world predisposes us to feelings of alienation, disconnection and isolation.

To balance the previous critique, Rubin (1996) argued that Buddhism sometimes does not foster criticism in its assertion of being present and non-existent decenteredness. This occurs because by being present and non-existent while ignoring aspects of consciousness, human experience is seen as a discontinued set of events that is ahistorical, arelational and non-self-centered. The danger in this is that it has the potential



to create a “self-induced historical amnesia” where amoral acts such as abuse of power, misappropriation of money, sexual exploitation (Boucher, 1988) and addiction to alcohol and drugs by spiritual teachers are not questioned in spiritual communities (Rubin, 1996). In this instance, amoral acts are often rationalized as irrelevant because they are not happening in the present, and ironically because of this denial, the practice of Buddhism to gain greater awareness and insight is thrown to the winds, replaced with self-centeredness and no self-consciousness. Furthermore, the hierarchical-authoritarian relationship between teacher and student does not help in addressing these amoral acts. A student is often expected to be virtuous by showing obedience and surrender to their teacher. However, this type of relationship puts the student at risk for being dominated and coerced especially if they are already feeling vulnerable to begin with, and for the spiritual teachers, it can breed a culture of self-denial and egocentrism. The likelihood of acting out in inappropriate ways is likely to continue occurring if issues of transference and countertransference are disregarded and not discussed. Transference in particular can occur when students mirror and idealize their teachers in order to heal their fragmented and empty selves (Engler, 1984; Kohut & Wolf, 1978).

To summarize, the emphasis on contextual conditions identifies and highlights aspects of selfhood that are valued in both Western psychology and Buddhist psychology. Rubin’s extended model (1996), therefore, seems to be a good starting point to explore how ideals from Western psychotherapy and Buddhism can be integrated, where each self is characterized by aspects that the other lacks and the trick may be to avoid tipping the balance either way. As such, Rubin’s integration model appears to be appropriate for future explorations that investigate both the processes of centering and decentering, as

subjectively experienced by someone who is transplanted from a collectivist-oriented culture to an individualistic-oriented one. Asian American Buddhists may be a particularly salient group to study from, not just for research and practice implications, but also for carrying out research framed by social action. The following section explicates further on the importance of studying this culture-specific group.

#### The Subcultures of American Buddhism: Asians and Whites

In the United States, there exist two major racial groups of Buddhist practitioners (Finn & Rubin, 2000). The larger one consists of immigrant or first-generation Asian Americans (IAA) and Asian Americans (AA) while the smaller one consists of middle-class White Americans (WA). In the first group, many IAA's and AA's, who are also labeled "ethnic Buddhists," came to United States post 1965 from countries including Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, Burma, Taiwan, and Mainland China (Fields, 1998). The IAA's and AA's tend to practice Buddhism as part of their community since this provides them with the opportunity to reaffirm and preserve their traditional identity as defined by family, ethnicity, culture and national origin (Gregory, 2001). This intersection of religion/spirituality with race/ethnicity in particular serves two different purposes. One, as mentioned previously, the communal aspect provides immigrants with a sense of belongingness that alleviates the challenges they experience in their second homeland. As such, practice is more integrated into family life, tends to be multigenerational including both the dead and the living, focuses on ritual activities (Gregory, 2001), and is not often characterized by self conscious tendencies such as the desire to achieve enlightenment (Fields, 1998). Moreover, this community has the potential to redistribute

power, privilege and prestige so as to gain economic, political, and cultural rights/advantages in American institutions.

Middle class WA Buddhists, who are also labeled “convert Buddhists” or “elite Buddhists” if this label fits, are usually well-educated and tend to be as a whole more homogenous as a group compared to IAA and AA Buddhists (Gregory, 2001). Many began practicing Buddhism during the countercultural revolution of the 1960’s learning from Asian teachers and wanting enlightenment and wanting it immediately (Fields, 1998). WA Buddhist practice often involves breaking with traditional values, individual practice, and is more self-conscious in that there is an active search for enlightenment (Gregory, 2001; Imamura, 1998). Presently, there are several trends that highlight the WA Buddhist movement (Kornfield, 1988): 1) it is largely a layperson’s movement, 2) it is largely influenced by Zen Buddhism, 3) Western psychology is accepted as an adjunct alternative, 4) women are beginning to shape the movement, 5) there is a strong momentum towards social action, and 6) it has made efforts to become more democratic and antiauthoritarian.

Evidence for interaction between WA and AA Buddhists is unclear. Some convey that there is nearly no interaction at all whereas others such as Numrich (1996) oppose such a view claiming that AA and non-AA Buddhist communities are not as far apart as one would think (Prebish, 1999). Regardless of the accuracy in these statements, one thing is for sure, as a reflection of the racial dynamics in the greater American culture, the tension between AA Buddhists and WA Buddhists have increasingly become tense and complex (Tanaka, 1998). To illustrate, the following is an excerpt from a prominent figure of American Buddhism. Helen Tworikov (1991) stated,

“If we are to affirm true pluralism we must accept that one person’s practice is another’s poison,” and then added , “the spokespeople for Buddhism in America have been, almost exclusively, educated members of the White middle class. Meanwhile, even with varying statistics, Asian American Buddhists number at least one million, but so far they have not figured very prominently in the development of something called American Buddhism” (p. 4).

Tanaka (1998) addressed this issue in the following summary,

“This division has also contributed to the simmering debate concerning the question, ‘Who represents the true American Buddhism?’ Some Asian American Buddhists are offended at the suggestion that White Buddhists are the sole contributors to the creation of American Buddhism, while ethnic Buddhists are seen as having played virtually no role in it. Such perception, in their view, ignores the contributions made by Asian American Buddhists with much longer history, some entering their second century on American soil. What is often implied, according to Asian American critics, is that Buddhism becomes truly America only when White Americans become seriously involved. This form, then, is called ‘American Buddhism,’ distinguished from simply ‘Buddhism in America,’ as practiced by Asian American Buddhists” (p.13).

The tension between the two camps is also sometimes demonstrated by language each uses to describe the other. AA Buddhists have sometimes been considered as fundamentalist, dogmatic or devotional whereas WA Buddhists have been thought as intellectually arrogant or purely enlightenment-seeking (Prebish, 1999).

### The Present Study

Through the present study, I would like to begin contributing to a type of dialogue that creates understanding and respect for different ways of being between American Buddhists of any background. Specifically, I would like to describe in-depth the experiences of decentering for a select group of racial minority American Buddhists. I am particularly interested in recruiting participants from the Fo Guan Shan Temple Buddhist Order, one of the largest Chinese American Buddhist groups in the United States. My interest in this group was largely led by the organization’s commitment to

play an active role in American Buddhism. The Order has experienced its own share of discrimination. One of the more notable instances of discrimination came about when the Order was embroiled in a political scandal when raising funds for the Democratic Party. The leader of this organization, Master Hsing Yun, underscored the racial tension from this incident when he responded ominously,

“How could something that is a good thing turn into something that is a bad thing? The more we Asians try to participate, the more we get criticized... We asked ourselves, ‘What is our mistake?’” he told one reporter. “The only mistake I can think of is that we were Asian” (Seager, 1999, p. 164).

To better understand the Fo Guan Shan Temple Buddhist Order, I believe it is essential to first ground oneself in a brief background description of its original figurehead, Master Hsin Yun, and its North American headquarters at Hsi Lai Temple.

Master Hsing Yun deserves special mention here as the original figurehead of the Fo Guang Shan Temple Buddhist Order, Fo Guang Shan meaning Buddha’s Light Mountain in Chinese (Pittman, 2001). Master Hsing Yun was born in 1926, became a monk at age 12, was fully ordained in 1941 and subsequently became the forty-eighth patriarch in the Linji School of Zen Buddhism. He named himself Hsing Yun which means nebula of stars in Chinese for he wanted to “add his own small ray of light to the constellation of bright stars radiating the Dharma” (Pittman, p. 270, 2001). Master Hsing Yun founded the Fo Guang Shan Temple Buddhist Order in Taiwan in 1967 with four objectives in mind: 1) to spread Buddhist teachings with cultural activities, 2) to train Buddhist missionaries, 3) to serve society with social, educational and health programs, and 4) to cleanse the human mind through Buddhist practices (Pittman, 2001).

Master Hsing Yun was instrumental in reviving Buddhism in Taiwan after leaving mainland China with the Nationalist regime during the Communist Revolution in 1948.

In addition, he has been a driving force in creating the largest Chinese Buddhist movement in the United States through the transmission of Humanistic Buddhism (Seager, 1999). This denomination of Buddhism believes in the accessibility, demystification and humanization of Buddha who did many of his activities in the human world: he was born in it, cultivated himself in it, was enlightened in it and taught others to experience nirvana in it, not apart from it (Hsing Yun, 1999). Thus, the main philosophy of Humanistic Buddhism is to encourage individuals to live fully in this world while practicing many of Buddha's teachings at the same time. Major themes practiced in Humanistic Buddhism include tolerance, loving-kindness, compassion, joyfulness, and equanimity in our lives and for others (Hsing Yun, 1999).

Hsi Lai Temple, Hsi Lai meaning "coming to the West" in Chinese, is an impressive monastic compound considered to be the largest Buddhist monastery in the Western hemisphere (Prebish, 1999). Planning for it began in 1976 and was headed by the Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Order in Taiwan under the leadership of Master Hsing Yun. Construction of the temple began in 1986 and ended in 1988. These two years were not without its share of high drama. The Fo Guang Shan Order faced a great deal of resistance from the local community in its construction of the temple. The Order had to contend with 6 public hearings where almost every negative racial and religious stereotype was brought to the forefront in the long process. It then seems reasonable that the mission of Hsi Lai Temple, as stated on its website, is to "serve as a spiritual and cultural center for those interested in learning more about Buddhism and Chinese culture." The temple is committed to playing an active role in American Buddhism and making substantial contributions to Buddhist leadership in the West.

Presently, the Temple is the headquarters for Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Order in the United States, one of the largest Chinese American Buddhist organizations. Most of its members are ethnic Chinese from many nationalities. However, people from all backgrounds are encouraged to participate and become members of the Order (Seager, 1999). In fact, some of the Temple's outreach activities are geared towards other racial/ethnic communities. Hsi Lai Temple is also the headquarters for the International Buddhist Progress Society (IBPS), a non-profit organization incorporated in California and that propagates the ideals of Humanistic Buddhism (Prebish, 1999; Seager, 1999). Lastly, the Temple houses the world headquarters for the Buddha's Light International Association (BLIA), inaugurated in 1991 (Prebish, 1999; Seager, 1999). The BLIA has more than one million members, mostly ethnic Chinese, in 51 countries across the world. It ranked itself as the fourth largest social club in the world behind such well known ones as Rotary Club, Lion's Club and United Way. BLIA's mission is to serve lay disciples who take refuge in Master Hsing Yun and are also official members of Hsi Lai Temple.

## CHAPTER 3: METHOD

### A Philosophical Framework: The Naturalistic Paradigm And Its Five Assumptions

The present study utilized the naturalistic paradigm as the overarching guide in studying the process of decentering for a select number of Buddhist practitioners in Texas. The naturalistic paradigm can be understood through five major axioms: ontology, epistemology, axiology, rhetoric and methodology (Guba & Lincoln, 1988).

First, the nature of reality (the axiom of **ontology**) is subjective and multiple, all of which is constructed and holistic. Prediction and control are not relevant as it is more important to understand multiple realities through quotes and themes, facilitating greater divergence and raising more questions along the inquiry process. Second, the relationship between knower and known (the axiom of **epistemology**), that is the inquirer and the object of inquiry, is interactive. This type of relationship drastically decreases the distance between knower and known, making them inseparable. The inquirer works with interviewees, spending time with them in their natural settings, and becoming “insiders” in the process. This conscious experiencing of the self in various identities helps the inquirer to increase their effectiveness in understanding the experiences of the interviewees. Third, it is understood that inquiry is value-bound (axiom of **axiology**), for example, the inquiry is determined by the type of paradigm adopted, inquiry is influenced by the context of interest, the inquirer exerts their value system when they focus on particular issues as opposed to others, etc. As such, the inquirer makes efforts to understand how their own values can mold subsequent interpretations of interviewees. Fourth, the language of interpretive research is literary, informal and personal (axiom of



**rhetoric**). The narrative of such research endeavors are characterized by an engaging style inviting the reader to experience from the text, using first person pronouns and terminology commonly found in qualitative research. Lastly, the process of research is inductive, studied within a context and emergent in design. The inquirer continuously works from particulars to generalizations and through evolving hypotheses (axiom of **methodology**). The naturalistic approach is considered antifoundational in that it is unlike quantitative research because of its refusal to ascertain cause and effect relationships, and universal truths that are considered permanent and unvarying.

#### A Tradition of Inquiry: The Phenomenological Approach

Framed by a naturalistic paradigm, this study used a phenomenological approach of inquiry. The phenomenological philosophy is rooted in the philosophy of Husserl. Husserl was interested in understanding what conditions underlie experience and make it possible (Natanson, 1973), or put in another way, what are the meanings or **essences** of everyday experience? Husserl believed that in order to carry out this type of inquiry it was crucial for the inquirer to engage in **epoche** or **bracketing-off**. An inquirer who engages in this task consistently reflects and questions their own experience of the world, mainly their assumptions, and suspending and **transcending** them so as to arrive at the ultimate truths of lived experiences. This allows for the inquirer to perform **imaginative variation** or **structural description** which is to understand “how” a phenomenon was experienced, and involves pursuing as many different perspectives about the phenomenon as is possible.

Presently, there appears to be 2 major schools of phenomenology: the old Husserlian school and the new empirical phenomenology (McLeod, 2001). Husserlian

phenomenology in the strictest sense does not endorse a contextual understanding of lived experiences. The rationale is that if one is able to arrive at the ultimate truth about a phenomenon then this ultimate truth should be able to hold across contexts. Empirical phenomenology, associated with the Duquesne School in the 1960's and mostly used in the field of psychology, tends to be much more flexible in this aspect. In fact, it endorses inquiry that seeks to understand people's subjective experiences. However, it has been criticized for its "cookbook" methodology (Crotty, 1996). Although in one respect the systematic methodology is helpful in training students and creating publishable papers, it has the potential to diminish the transcendental aspect of the epoche process, which oftentimes relies on experience and intuition. Another major criticism is failure to exercise epoche, which can contaminate the inquirer's understanding of the phenomenon being studied, and has the potential to prevent new insights from being formed. Moustakas' (1994) data analysis method works to create a compromise between old and new phenomenologies. His data analysis approach uses the "cookbook" methodology while maintaining the importance of epoche, hence an empirical/transcendental phenomenology. (Moustakas' approach will be reviewed in detail under the section "Data Analysis.")

For this study, I used a **psychological approach** (used by psychologists who discuss the methodological aspects of phenomenological inquiries, including integration of researcher into studies and analysis of themes for meanings) that incorporates both **empirical** and **transcendental** phenomenologies. I'd like to take a moment to explain why this decision was appropriate for me, the researcher as instrument. Being that this was my first time conducting a phenomenological study, I believed the empirical aspect

of psychological phenomenology would provide the structure I needed to learn and apply this approach with some degree of confidence. As to the transcendental aspect of psychological phenomenology, I have consistently gained experience in this area as a therapist in training for the last seven years. I have come to view therapy as a transcendental process where I continuously engage in and attempt to master “parallel” epoche. For me, this is an iterative, dynamic and intersubjective experience where both the client and I question our own assumptions, to make sense of the client’s rich narrative and to cross question our assumptions about each other. One of the main goals for this work is to engender positive change. Consequently, I also saw how I needed to be careful about not engaging in therapy with the interviewees. For instance, I avoided sharing my assumptions about the interviewee or invite them to question my assumptions. I was aware that the study’s aim was to understand how interviewees made sense of the phenomenon of decentering. As such, interviewees were asked to share their insights for the sake of understanding and not to make cognitive/behavioral changes of any kind.

Before moving on to an extensive description of the study’s research design, I’d like to provide a brief synopsis here to prime the reader to what is generally involved in phenomenological methods (Creswell, 1998; McLeod, 2001). Detailed elaboration of individual concepts will be provided under their respective sub-sections in Research Design. First, an inquirer in a phenomenological study suggests the a priori existence of an essential structure in the phenomenon to be studied (decentering). The researcher prepares for this inquiry by bracketing their own understanding of the phenomenon

before using in-depth interviewing techniques and throughout the study. In a way, bracketing by the researcher is the **first step of data analysis**.

The aim of a phenomenological study is to understand the essential meaning of experiencing a phenomenon by using rich, subjective descriptions for a select number of carefully-chosen individuals, who actually experience the phenomenon in their lives. In analyzing their collected data, it is generally understood that researchers will immerse themselves in the narratives; choose significant statements about the phenomenon (**horizontalization**); transform them into clusters of meanings and themes; and create **textural description** of what was experienced and **structural description** of how it was experienced. At the end of the study, the researcher describes the phenomenon by delineating an **essential, invariant structure (essence)**. The reader of the study should feel **verisimilitude**, as quoted by Polkinghorne (1989, p.46), “I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that.”

To conclude, the phenomenological tradition of inquiry appears to be a philosophically- and methodologically-appropriate approach in answering the main question of the present study “What is essential for the experience to be described by interviewees as decentering?”

### Research Design

The research design for this study is presented, for the most part, in chronological order of tasks completed. Before reading this section, it is strongly suggested that the reader refer to the Sources of Data (Appendix A) so as to gain a coherent sense of how the study was designed and completed. The subsections included under Research Design are as follows Participants, Gaining Entry and Developing Rapport; Selecting

Interviewees; Informed Consent and Interview Set-Up; Data Collection: In-Depth Interviewing; Recording Information; Data Analysis; Methods of Verification; Limitations of Study; and Taking Leave.

### *Participants*

Considering the epistemological and axiological aspects of a naturalistic paradigm and the intersubjectivity of a phenomenological approach, it was important for this study to include both the researcher and the interviewees as participants. This section will first begin discussion of the Researcher as Instrument; My Assumptions and Biases About the Phenomenon and Interviewees; and My Steps to Working with Subjectivity and Personal Biases. My role as a “participant” in this study will be limited to the bracketing component so as to ensure, as much as is possible, a separation between my voice and those of the interviewees. The bracketing portion will then be followed by a description of the Fo Guan Shan sites in Texas where I recruited the interviewees. A description of the interviewees will be provided in the Selecting Interviewees section.

#### *The Researcher as Instrument (Self-Reflection 1 - Initial Bracketing and Analysis)*

My interest in this study is the result of various interests that have emerged and converged throughout my education as a student of psychology. I knew that I enjoyed the tradition of storytelling as a child. I grew up with parents whose generation suffered much from war trauma and often coped with their personal tragedies through storytelling. When I first began my journey as a psychology student, I was formally introduced to qualitative research through my first professor in counseling psychology at York University, Dr. David Rennie. It was the first time in my life I felt someone had encouraged me to engage in philosophical discourse and seamlessly combined discourses

about counseling with principles from qualitative research. It was in his classes that I first began to dialogue about what it means to have a sense of self and its relationship to mental health, to use the word “I” as a way of taking on personal responsibility in my work and writings, and to become more reflective about how my life experiences (especially the immigrant ones) molded my development as a human being and the way I view the world. I think the way our class exchanged our experiences touched a part of me that had been alienated for too long, but did not know how to reach out until I came across this experience. There’s a part of me that has always longed for a deep connection with others through a keen sense of curiosity. As you can imagine, I was enthralled by my first formal foray into qualitative research, both intellectually and emotionally. Needless to say, Dr. Rennie’s class definitely left its imprint as I came down to the US for my graduate studies.

Being a rather earnest person, I couldn’t wait to continue engaging in philosophical discourses (it is rather addictive) in my masters program. I was eager to begin my work with the research teams I had joined. Their areas of interest were also of interest to me, a strong reflection of my life experiences and what I considered important (cross cultural identity and mental health for Asians and Asian Americans, and multicultural counseling competencies). After some time and much to my dismay, I felt I had been intellectually demoted to carrying out the mundane tasks of quantitative research. In addition, I was anxious about applying for doctoral programs. When I attained enough seniority in my research teams, my professors encouraged me to conceptualize quantitative research with them. And even then, something still seemed to be missing, that old feeling of alienation and disconnectedness from what I was studying.

I missed those philosophical discourses in Dr. Rennie's class that had the power to "move" me as a whole being. It was a saving grace for me that I was able to pursue many of my topical interests in the deep and connected manner that I preferred from a few lecture seminars and experiential classes. So despite my dissatisfaction with my research experiences, I felt I was able to experience my silver lining and continue my passions in a different context.

Once I arrived to my doctoral program, which was culturally different from what I was used to for a number of years in my life, I unsurprisingly experienced one of the several cultural shocks in my life, again. Aside from the cultural shock, I was also burnt out from my masters program, beginning to struggle with wanting to be the person that I aspired to be and learning how to be more independent. It was around this time that I felt I was losing intimacy with myself and was finding it difficult to establish intimacy between myself and others. I became increasingly concerned with my apathy towards living in my busyness within many areas of my life, and was beginning to worry that I was losing my sense of wonder and joy in living. Looking back, I think I was just paralyzed for a while: there were many changes occurring in my life and yet I was afraid to change, to let go, and at the very least, to follow some new horizons. Fortunately, I did notice that the storm was somewhat less intense and shorter in duration compared to prior experiences. Eventually I was able to be more present with my pain, and proactive in maintaining my sense of self-preservation. In my academic experience, I became more focused in applied research and figuring out what my theoretical orientation was as a therapist in training.

As my level of angst decreased, I serendipitously (really) stumbled across some introductory Buddhist texts that spoke about the concept of egolessness and the certainty of impermanence in life in the context of the Four Noble Truths. In another moment of serendipity, my inclinations towards philosophy, anything to do with Asian culture as a different way of experiencing the world, qualitative research, desire to feel deeply connected with what I study, and my need to choose a dissertation topic, I thought it would be a worthwhile endeavor to finally pursue something that encompassed many of my heartfelt interests (hence, this dissertation topic).

*Assumptions and Biases about the Phenomenon and Interviewees (Self-Reflection 2 – Initial Bracketing and Analysis)*

In conducting this study, I was concerned that my understanding of decentering would interfere with the interviewees' understanding of said process. Most of my understanding in decentering is based on reading Buddhist-related literature, personal reflections about my life experiences and of others, and carrying out Buddhist norms and rituals with my family. It took a while for me to notice that I was too "attached" to this academic term and its definition. This is probably why setting up this study has been somewhat difficult for me. My epiphany came around when I had a recent conversation with the abbess about the Four Noble Truths. I was caught off guard when she kept mentioning the word "emptiness." At this point I realized I was still grappling with the term decentering despite my intellectual understanding of it. It was difficult for me to see how decentering was connected to this feeling of positive emptiness. I understood what I was reading but wasn't sure how this could be applied and achieved in real life. On a less conscious level, I was also trying to determine its definition for the interviewees before



interviewing them. The way I understand decentering now is that it is a focused process, and yet also an all-encompassing process, just like the Four Noble Truths. I remembered the practice participant sharing with me numerous times that one's intentions matter a great deal in how one understands the process of decentering, and how they can influence its practice and subsequent manifestation. Intentions serve as anchors. Truth be told, I still can't say exactly why I'm interested in the process of decentering, but what drives me is the intriguing notion of transcending oneself through positive emptiness and becoming a more self-integrated and compassionate human being. To me, this is a worthwhile intention and goal.

I realized the best way to address my assumptions and biases was to return to myself, and clarify my intentions for pursuing this topic of interest. Looking back at the section of "The Researcher as Instrument," I was attracted to decentering as explained through the **Four Noble Truths**. It is a **personal process** of being open to **change**, of learning to be less **attached** to worldly experiences as they can create a **conditioned mind** and subsequently **suffering**. For me, addressing assumptions and biases is not just about being aware of my own subjectivity so it does not constrain future expressions of interviewees about the phenomenon of decentering. It is also an opportunity for me to delineate some basic operational parameters and gain more focus in studying the phenomenon of decentering. The bolded words Four Noble Truths, personal process, change, attached, conditioned mind and suffering played an important role in how I set up my interview protocols.

Having said this, I was careful to also listen with an "inclusive" ear. In a way, for someone who is more interested in outcomes than process when practicing decentering,

the outcome becomes part of the process for that individual. There are different ways of looking at process. I reminded myself that process can be experienced by individuals who are focused on process and also by those focused on outcomes. Another bias that I had to keep in mind is my dislike towards any kind of religious fervor that hints towards fanatical brainwashing. It is possible that my dislike stems from religious practice which has no space for active questioning. I find that I also favor individuals who practice religion as a way of passing on familial and cultural traditions and values, to gain a sense of belonging and connectedness.

*Steps to Working with Subjectivity and Personal Biases (Additional Bracketing and Analysis Throughout the Study)*

Subsequent bracketing and analysis were performed to help describe the essence of the experience of decentering for the interviewees. I monitored my assumptions and biases using various sources of data throughout different phases of the study. **For the practice and pilot studies**, I noted any concerns and questions I had to address the effectiveness of my interview questions and interviewing style. This helped me to create changes that were conducive to creating a space where interviewees could talk more openly about the phenomenon of decentering, i.e. creating new interview questions that addressed important themes. Before carrying out the third interview, I listened to the first 2 interviews of the practice and pilot participants to help me create questions for the third interview, tailoring them to the emerging and unique themes of each participant. At the end of both studies, I shared reactions, notes and questions with my Advisor, Dr. Michael Mobley, to fine-tune the interview protocols and my interviewing style. **After each interview**, I recorded my spontaneous reactions to each of the interviews I conducted for

that day. These reactions were not reflections because I wanted my assumptions and biases to come through in a free associative manner, not buried by defenses. I read these reactions as another measure of bracketing before reading the transcribed interview data for analysis. I also consulted with my Advisor about the interview protocols and my interviewing style throughout the core study. **During the data analysis phase**, at the end of the fourth step of analysis, I 1) met with two peer reviewers who reviewed raw data and my analyzed results, and 2) conducted individual feedback sessions by phone with each of the interviewees.

### *The Study Site*

For this study, I chose participants from the Austin Chapter of International Buddhist Progress Society (IBPS). This lay organization of Fo Guan Shan Buddhist Order is housed within Hsiang Yun Temple in Austin, Texas. The temple is nestled in the hills of the scenic Hill Country on the northwest side of the City of Austin. This area also has a high concentration of affluent neighborhoods. One nun and many of the lay practitioners at the temple fit the criteria I delineated in one of the following sections, “Selecting Interviewees. The Austin temple is run by three resident nuns, including the abbess. Compared to the other temples in Texas, it attracts the most non-Asian practitioners and/or visitors who are interested in Buddhism. Still, most of its lay practitioners, who engage in the formal practice of Humanistic Buddhism, are Asian American and can converse proficiently in English. Many of them take turns to translate for the nuns from Mandarin to English during the temple’s formal activities. These lay practitioners have their own organization as part of the worldwide BLIA. Lay practitioners are categorized between those who practice Humanistic Buddhism on a

formal basis or on an informal one. A lay practitioner engages in formal practice when they take refuge in the teachings of Master Hsing Yun. They are involved in many of the temple's formal activities and can attain three different levels of practice (Taking Refuge in the Triple Gem, Five Precepts and Bodhisattva).

*Gaining Entry and Developing Rapport*

In preliminary negotiations to gain entry into the aforementioned temples, I spoke in-person with the formally-recognized community leader, the abbess at the Fo Guan Shan Temple in Austin. My decision to seek out the abbess was based on prior observations of a Fo Guan Shan branch temple close to my hometown in Canada. I gained a sense that interpersonal interactions tended to be hierarchical, with those in the lower ranks being highly deferential and respectful to those in the higher ranks. In fact, in my subsequent observations of the Austin temple, which is much smaller in membership size than the temple I visited in Canada, this hierarchical characteristic was even more pronounced.

The abbess was not proficient in English and we conversed with one another in Mandarin most of the time, interspersed with English. I shared with her my reasons for visiting the temple and spoke to her in great detail about the purpose of the study and its procedures. I did not interview the abbess for the same reasons: her non-proficient English and her in-depth involvement which helped me gain entry, develop rapport and select interviewees from the temple. In our conversations, she expressed a strong personal interest in my dissertation topic and a commitment to help me recruit participants. She made a number of suggestions to help me gain entry. One, the abbess and I met twice to review my dissertation proposal. I used these opportunities to ask the

abbess to begin identifying interviewees, and to delineate the parameters of a permission letter to recruit interviewees at the temple. Two, the abbess recommended that I become a more familiar, physical presence at the temple by attending its regular activities as often as possible. She believed that since most of the formal lay practitioners are Asian Americans, the idea of me approaching them without a basic level of familiarity, might have affected my subsequent efforts for interviewee recruitment and a fluid interviewing process. A number of years before I started collecting data in 2007, I consistently visited the temple during the weekends to attend many of its formal activities (meditation, dharma lecture, chanting, lunch, and volunteer meetings) open to the public.

I'd like to add that even though I visited the temple to help with the progress of my study, I also did it for personal reasons. I found the temple's activities enjoyable, relaxing and stimulating. It was an opportunity to energize myself, and to learn more about Buddhist teachings and its practice. Throughout these activities, I was careful to maintain my interactions courteous, and friendly. I did not develop personal relationships with any of the members outside of the temple. These safeguards were meant to prevent any interpersonal complications that might have interfered with participant recruitment and interviewing process.

Last, the abbess made a suggestion/request that directly addressed the issue of reciprocity. Immediately following our conversation, about my interest in recruiting participants from her temple and other ones, she asked if I would volunteer my time to help organize a major Buddhist music festival hosted by the temple. So, in addition to being present at the temple on an on-going basis, I volunteered in many different areas with this event: advertising, ticket sales, hospitality, food preparation, pamphlet

distribution and parking control. This was a great opportunity for me to familiarize myself with the temple's overall culture, and to get to know the temple's members. I also volunteered for the Buddhist Spring Festival in the areas of hospitality and parking control. The Festival's main objective was to introduce Humanistic Buddhism to potential new members in a celebratory manner.

### *Selecting Interviewees*

In terms of actual sample size, published studies using a phenomenological approach have used anywhere from 1 to 325 interviewees in their studies (Dukes, 1984; Polkinghorne, 1989). Dukes (1984) goes further by recommending a selection of 3 to 10 interviewees in phenomenological studies. In this study, because a highly focused sampling method was used to recruit interviewees, and the interest was in the richness of the interviewees' narratives, gathered through in-depth interviewing, the final sample size included 6 interviewees, including the pilot study interviewee but not the practice study participant.

Interviewees were selected through criterion sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In other words, selection of interviewees was based on the criterion that they had experienced the process of decentering (the phenomenon) and could verbally express these experiences in proficient English (as determined by a number of different factors delineated in the Personal Background Information Sheet in Appendix D). I consulted with the head abbess to assist me in identifying information-rich interviewees, who had experienced the process of decentering and were proficient in English. She identified both nuns and higher-level lay practitioners. This latter selection was necessary because

only a select number of nuns were proficient in English to engage in in-depth interviewing.

Again, the balancing characteristic (or control variable in quantitative research), the level of formal and serious practice in Humanistic Buddhism, is important since it is mainly this characteristic that is driving the recruitment requirement behind criterion sampling: interviewees must experience the process of decentering. Thus, a higher-level lay practitioner is defined as someone who has formally taken refuge in the teachings of Master Hsin Yun (formal aspect of practice), and who is also considered by the nuns and fellow members as someone who actively practices Buddhist principles in their daily lives (core aspect of practice). In addition, in my informal conversations with fellow temple attendees and the practice study interviewee, my impression was that the core aspect of practice was much more meaningful and important than the formality of Taking Refuge in the Triple Gem. Other balancing characteristics of importance included the interviewees' age and gender.

Participants included 3 males and 3 females, and their ages ranged from 29 to 63. Three were in their young adulthood (29 to 34), one in middle adulthood (50) and the remaining two in late adulthood (59 to 63). All participants were born in Asian countries: Indonesia, Malaysia and Mainland China. Residency status in the United States ranged from 11 years to 42 years. Five of the 6 participants received post-secondary education. Two participants had Bachelors degrees (one in Journalism and the other in Economics), two had Masters degrees (one in Electrical Engineering and the other in Engineering Management), and one had a Doctorate in Electrical Engineering. Four of the 5 lay practitioners were married at the time of the study, with the remaining one in a serious

long-term relationship. Two of the participants had been divorced in the past and one had re-married.

Participants in this study included 5 lay practitioners from the Austin Chapter of IBPS, and one resident, ordained nun from Hsiang Yun Temple. Practitioners were formal lay practitioners who had gone through formal ceremonies and taken vows to commit themselves to the FGS Buddhist Order. A note to the reader, taking vows within a sect/denomination is a common Buddhist practice. The first induction ceremony is taking refuge in the Triple Gem whereby a lay practitioner makes a commitment to living their life in a way that is modeled after the Buddha's life (Sajiamuni, the Buddha of this era), learning the teachings of Buddha (Dharma), and becoming a participating member of the religious community (Sangha). Participants took refuge in the Triple Gem at different times, one as recently as 2 years ago and another 15 years ago.

#### *Informed Consent and Interview Set-Up*

This first meeting, about 15 minutes long, consisted of obtaining Informed Consent (See Appendix C) and pertinent Personal Background Information (See Appendix D), creating an interviewee codename that was used on all sources of data (except the Informed Consent form and their Personal Background Information Sheet), and setting up an Interview Schedule (See Appendix E). Lastly, I disclosed the “grand tour” question for the first interview to the interviewees. The goal was to prime the interviewees to the interview process. Informed consent was established with all interviewees before any type of personal information was obtained from them.

I reviewed in-person the Informed Consent Form with each interviewee before completing all other data forms. The Informed Consent Form stated the main purpose



and the procedures used in the study, monetary compensation, the interviewee's right to voluntarily withdraw at any time, the protection of interviewees' confidentiality, risks involved and benefits of this study. I financed participant compensation. Interviewees were compensated at a rate of \$15 per hour for face-to-face participation, and received cash payment at the end of each session. Alternatively with their consent, I donated this money to their affiliated temple in a lump sum after all activities were completed for that particular participant. All financial compensations were documented with receipts including participant's or Temple's name, their address, social security number (for individual participants), amount and date of payment. In the end, all participants decided to donate their monetary compensation to the temple.

There were no known risks associated with this study. Interviewees might have experienced minimal discomforts simply from being interviewed. To minimize these discomforts, I increased the predictability of unfolding events by taking the time to engage participants in the informed consent process. I also framed their participation by stating the general timeline of completion and reviewing the interview structure in advance. I encouraged participants to speak to me for any questions or concerns they had during the study either in person or by contacting me. In maintaining confidentiality, interviewees were informed about who would have access to their data under codenames (myself, dissertation committee members, and two peer reviewers). Any feedback discussions focused on data relating to the individual interviewee or the interviewee group as a whole. Individual interviewee data was not shared between interviewees. Any type of data that needed to be securely stored was either stored in a laptop requiring a log-in username and password, or was stored in a locked file cabinet.

*Data Collection: In-Depth Phenomenologically-Based Interviewing*

Narrative data for phenomenological studies is often collected through in-depth interviewing. For this study, I chose Seidman's (1991) in-depth phenomenologically based interviewing method, a longer and more involved form of in-depth interviewing. This type of interview has a built-in structure that not only is consistent with the philosophy of phenomenological studies (the aim is to describe how interviewees understand and make meaning of the phenomenon they experience); but also encourages the production of rich narratives, conducive to carrying out the meaning- (or essence-) seeking type of analysis central in phenomenological studies. Using this form of interview, each interviewee was interviewed on three separate occasions using open-ended questions. It was key for me to listen (both my own reactions and the interviewee's narrative), not assume the role of expert, and work to enter the subjective world of the interviewees, thus the importance of intersubjectivity. Initially, I thought the ideal location to conduct all interviews was in quiet rooms located within the temple. However, I found interviewing the practice study interviewee, in the privacy and quiet of his home, increased his level of comfort and willingness to speak in-depth about his experiences with the process of decentering. Because of this, participants had the option of meeting me at their homes. As it turned out, the remaining participants chose to be interviewed at the temple.

The first session asked interviewees to contextualize decentering within their personal history. They were asked to talk about past experiences, especially meaningful ones that contributed to their interest in the formal practice of decentering. The second interview asked the interviewee to describe (or reconstruct) in concrete detail what

decentering is like in the present. The third interview was where the integration of past, present and future experiences of decentering come into focus. Interviewees were asked to reflect, not remember, what it **means** for them to decenter considering the information they provided in the first two sessions.

Overlap between the three interviews does occur and as a rule is considered acceptable, as long as the information was recorded. In terms of structure, each of the three sessions lasted no longer than 90 minutes or until I felt that all possible questions were asked and a saturation point was reached. The rationale for this is that a standard one-hour interview is too limiting and predictable, whereas a 2-hour interview session is too long. The 90-minute structure was closely followed so as to set a chronological unity to the interview. Both the interviewees and I worked within a predetermined framework that had a beginning, middle and end to guide the direction of the interview. Interviewees were informed in advance how much of their time was needed for the study. Data shared off the record was rarely used and only used when it clarified what was said during the interview session. The sequencing of the three interviews is also of particular importance. A spacing of 1 week between the three interviews is designed to help interviewees become more open and cohesive in their responses as they approach the third interview. It is also acceptable to conduct all three interviews in 2 weeks with the first two interviews in the first week and the third interview in the second week (Seidman, 1991). In this study, the extra lag time before the third interview was an opportunity for interviewees to integrate information from the first two interviews and become more cohesive for the last interview, which is the one that requires the most integration.

Interview protocols were used for each of the three interviews (See Appendix F). Interview protocols reminded interviewees to minimize the use of formal language such as formal Buddhist terms and concepts. This encouraged interviewees to focus more on the personal meanings they attach to the process of decentering, and not their knowledge-based understanding of it. The practice and pilot study participants went through all three interviews so I could determine the appropriateness and effectiveness of the questions asked, and review my interactions with the interviewees. I noted questions and concerns that arose during the practice and pilot studies. These were shared and reviewed with my Advisor so as to revise the pilot study and final (core) study interview protocols. The remaining interviewees were interviewed using the finalized interview protocols. I continued to note questions and concerns in regards to interviewing issues with the remaining interviewees. This information was shared with my Advisor on an as-needed basis.

#### *Recording Information*

Practice study, pilot study, and the remaining interviews were all recorded using a digital recorder. I transcribed all audio files. The benefit of a researcher conducting transcription is that it allows them to familiarize themselves with and immerse themselves in the data, important analytical tasks in phenomenologically-oriented studies (Creswell, 1998).

#### *Data Analysis*

I analyzed the data in its entirety. Also, to prevent data analysis from guiding the interviewing process, I did not begin in-depth data analysis during the data collection period. For example, during the data collection period, I listened to each interviewee's

first two recorded interviews before the third interview. This helped me to create additional questions and identify areas of focus for the third interview.

The present phenomenological study used Moustaka's (1994) method of data analysis: a psychological approach that incorporates empirical/transcendental phenomenologies. The **initial** step involved bracketing by the researcher which I described in detail under the subsections of Researcher as Instrument; My Assumptions and Biases About the Phenomenon and Interviewees; and My Steps to Working with Subjectivity and Personal Biases. This was then followed by **four other steps** that analyze the data for each of the interviewees.

The **first** step is horizontalization of data where I immersed myself in the transcribed interview narratives and identified significant statements about how interviewees were experiencing the phenomenon. Each statement was treated as unique and important (inclusivity is important in this step), and only then was a list developed for non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements. **Second**, significant statements were inductively grouped into a small number of themes or meaning units. The **third** step consisted of two tasks. One, a textural description was written by relying on the themes or meaning units developed. A textural description describes "what" was experienced by the interviewees in regards to the phenomenon and can be accompanied by quotes. Two, a structural description is also written by relying on the themes or meaning units developed. A structural description describes "how" interviewees experienced the phenomenon, and is more of a critical examination of the data. This is because it uses imaginative variation where the goal is to search for all possible meanings so as to create potentially new meanings. **Fourth**, using the information gleaned from step three, I

arrived at an overall, brief textural-structural composite of the “what” and “how” of the essence or the essential, invariant structure for the phenomenon of decentering for all interviewees.

Lastly, two voluntary peer reviewers, with prior knowledge of Moustaka’s (1994) data analysis method, examined raw data, fully-analyzed results for one participant, and overall textural/structural/textural-structural descriptions. Reviewers had the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the data before examining the analyzed results. They were not expected to analyze the data but were asked to provide feedback of my analyzed results. I also scheduled 45- to 90-minute individual feedback sessions with each of the participants. During these sessions, I summarized their results, asked for their clarifications for any questions I had, and solicited their feedback on anything they felt they needed to express to/clarify for me.

#### *Verification*

Verification, a qualitative process, is often synonymous with validity, from quantitative process (Creswell, 1998). It is a distinct concept that values time spent in the natural setting of study, detailed thick descriptions, and development of rapport between researcher and interviewees. In regards to empirical and transcendental phenomenology, beyond the perspective and interpretation of the researcher, emphasis is not placed on verification (Creswell, 1998). However, Creswell & Miller (1997) have identified a number of important verification procedures, irrespective of perspective and commonly found in literature. Specific verification procedures adopted from their findings and used in this study included the following:

*Prolonged Engagement and Persistent Observation*

I developed a basic level of rapport with the interviewees by participating in formal activities and doing volunteer work at the temple. The 3-session interview structure used with all interviewees (practice, pilot and core study interviewees), and individual feedback sessions were additional opportunities to develop collaborative working relationships with the interviewees.

*Triangulation*

Credibility (internal validity) in this study will be established by using 1) various **sources of data** (see Appendix A); 2) various **methods** (3-session interview with each interview having a different focus; practice and pilot studies to create effective, final interview protocols; and the phenomenon of decentering was analyzed for both researcher and interviewees); 3) **investigators** (although I am the main investigator, during the phases of interviewing and data analysis, I received assistance from a number of dissertation committee members, two voluntary peer reviewers, and interviewees for individual feedback sessions); and 4) **theories** (although the overall tone of this study was phenomenological, it included aspects of both empirical and transcendental phenomenologies).

*Rich, Thick Descriptions*

This procedure deals with transferability (external validity). The detailed descriptions make it possible for readers to determine if the study's findings can be transferred to other settings.

*Clarifying Researcher Bias*

I clarified my researcher bias as demonstrated by initial bracketing under subsections Researcher as Instrument; and My Assumptions and Biases About the Phenomenon and Interviewees. Subsequent bracketing was described in detail under the subsection My Steps to Working with Subjectivity and Personal Biases.

*Peer Review*

Two voluntary peer reviewers provided feedback to the analyzed results of one participant. They also had the opportunity to review overall textural, structural and textural-structural descriptions.

*Member Checks*

To Lincoln and Guba (1985), this is considered “the most critical technique for establishing credibility (internal validity)” (p. 314). Interviewees from this study participated in lengthy (45 minute to 90 minute), individual feedback sessions.

*Taking Leave*

I continued attending activities and doing volunteer work at the temple throughout this study. In terms of publication, I informed each of the participants of this possibility during the informed consent process. I let them know that at that point I would consult with the temple and the interviewees to see if they would be interested in participating in the publication process, and if so, in what ways. The paper, if published, would at the very least include a general thank-you note to the temple and its members.



## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### An Overview of Data Analysis

Analyzed phenomenological data for the current study is presented by following Moustakas (1994) method of phenomenological analysis. That is, the order in which the results are presented, closely follows the order of analytical steps found in Moustakas method of data analysis: 1) an overview of clustered themes with non-repetitive and relevant statements (invariant constructs), 2) a textural description built from the clustered themes, describing the outer textures of the phenomenon, accessible and viewable to an outside observer looking in, 3) a structural description built by looking at the textural data with greater depth, and 4) a textural-structural composite built by merging the textural and structural descriptions, creating a more comprehensive and cohesive understanding of what is essential in the phenomenon of decentering. Participant codenames will be used throughout the text to ease the flow of sharing their descriptive data with the reader. Their names are Smart, Monkey King, Sun, Upasika, Silent Monkey, and Dragon. Excerpts of raw data for these participants are provided in Appendices 10 to 15.

#### *Clustered Themes (Invariant Constructs)*

Clustered themes or meaning units were created after non-repeating significant statements in the raw data were inductively grouped together. Analysis of data showed that seven clustered themes were consistently relevant for all participants: 1) sociocultural background, 2) family influence, 3) family of origin's religious practice, 4) personhood, 5) poignant life experiences, 6) process of the Buddhist practice and 7)

outcomes of Buddhist practice. To better understand how these clustered themes are interrelated, I clustered them into three major sections, starting with formative life experiences, turning towards Buddhism, and Buddhist practice. Table 1 presents the three major sections, each with their own set of themes. Going down through Table 1, one can see that the unfolding of the analyzed results parallel the order in which the interviews were set up and the chronological manner in which data (life events) was shared by the participants. Refer to Appendices 10 to 15 to gain a more intimate sense of how each participant described these themes by verbatim.

Table 1.

*Seven themes and their clusters of non-repeating significant statements subsumed under 3 major sections.*

<b>Section I. Formative Life Experiences</b>	
Theme	Clusters of Non-Repeating Significant Statements
1. Sociocultural background	a) Economic stability/instability b) Political stability/instability c) Ethnic dynamics
2. Family influence	a) On the development of morality b) On the development of compassion
3. Family of origin's religious practice	a) Following family of origin's religious practice b) Early reactions to religious experience c) Persons of influence
4. (Participants') Personhood	a) Personality b) Obstacles encountered while developing their personhood c) Initiative for self-improvement d) Persons of influence e) Cathartic learning (spontaneous) f) Cumulative learning (over time)
<b>Section II. Turning Towards Buddhist Practice</b>	
Theme	Clusters of Non-Repeating Significant Statements
5. Poignant life experiences	a) Negative life events b) Positive life events
<b>Section III. Buddhist Practice</b>	
Theme	Clusters of Non-Repeating Significant Statements
6. Process of Buddhist practice	a) Motivation for Buddhist practice b) Goal setting in Buddhist practice c) Solidifying a Buddhist identity d) Persons of influence e) Mindful living f) Obstacles in Buddhist practice g) Cathartic learning (spontaneous) h) Cumulative learning (over time)
7. Outcomes of Buddhist practice	a) Wisdom b) Compassion c) Happiness

*Textural Description*

The textural description describes what was experienced by the interviewees in regards to the phenomenon of decentering. It relies on clustered themes (in Table 1) to provide a rich description of external textures associated with the process of decentering. To start, the four themes classified under the first section “Formative Life Experiences,” were usually gleaned within the first interview (See Appendix 6). They speak to the participants’ formative life experiences before they engaged in self-initiated Buddhist practice. This gave participants the opportunity to begin contextualizing their process of decentering within their personal history.

The second section “Turning Towards Buddhist Practice” highlighted the occurrence of poignant life experiences, also gathered from the first interview (See Appendix 6) where participants were asked to talk about past meaningful life events. These events reportedly played a significant role in encouraging the participants to explore Buddhism with greater interest.

Data for the last two themes under the third section “Buddhist Practice” were usually gathered in the second and third interviews (See Appendices 7 and 8). Interview protocol questions from Interviews 2 and 3 focused on participants’ current practice of Buddhism, and how they have come to understand their Buddhist practice over the years, respectively. Put differently, participants were asked to describe how they were currently engaged in the process of decentering, and how they’ve come to understand their experience of decentering. To summarize, participants’ narratives highlighted their 1) exploration of Buddhism before becoming a formal layperson of the FGS Buddhist Order, 2) life events that might have increased their interest towards Buddhist practice, 3)

current Buddhist practice, and 4) how they understand their Buddhist practice thus far.

The progression of analyzed results begins to show us how participants engaged in the process of decentering through their Buddhist practice.

*Section I: Formative Life Experiences*

*Sociocultural background.* All participants were first-generation immigrants in the United States. They were born in different Asian countries and identified themselves as ethnic Chinese when they lived in those countries. A common sociocultural factor involved immediate family members experiencing heightened economic and/or political instability in their lives, usually as a result of forces outside of their control. For example, the Chinese Cultural Revolution was a particular point in history that created a great deal of trauma in the lives of some participants and their families. Another common sociocultural factor was the participants' close association with their Chinese identity and the role it played in their lives whether it was positive and/or negative. For some, the negative impact of ethnic minority dynamics occurred when they lived in Asian countries where the Chinese are still considered ethnic minorities. Many of the participants talked about prejudices against them as a result of their Chinese minority status in their native countries. To illustrate, Chinese language education was forbidden by law in some Asian countries. Silent Monkey talked about how her parents had to pay to send her and her siblings to private schools in Malaysia so she could learn Chinese. Upasika, lived in Indonesia, where Chinese education was forbidden and her mother taught her and her siblings to be proficient in Chinese on her own. The participants also talked about acculturation and assimilation difficulties once they moved from their native countries to the United States. One way or another, the participants' sociocultural

background sometimes created negative feelings and suffering in their lives. The existence of suffering, as stated in the Four Noble Truths, and its acknowledgement are important ingredients in jumpstarting the process of decentering. In a way, the entire section on formative life experiences is a way of gauging how a participant suffered in their lives and how much they accepted their own experiences of suffering. Without these prerequisites, it would be difficult to study the process of decentering.

*Family influence.* Participants talked about their family experiences growing up. They reminisced about the positive and negative aspects of their childhood experiences. In particular, family influence in the context of parents while they were growing up was elaborated on. They described their parents' personalities, the type of parenting style they engaged in (supportive, nurturing, strict, disciplinarian, dismissive), which parent they tended to favor, and how they were positively influenced by their parents. Moral development was explicitly expressed by all participants, as someone in the family usually the parents, actively modeled moral behavior. On the other hand, development for the capacity to be compassionate was mentioned by some of the participants.

*Family of origin's religious practice.* All participants followed their parents' lead in their early exposure to religious practices (i.e. some form of Chinese religion, typically a Chinese Buddhism that combines Confucianism and Taoism). This pattern held even for those participants who happened to attend schools hosted by other major religions such as Catholicism or Islam. Involvement was passive since all participants mentioned they modeled after their parents or other family elders in carrying out religious rituals, usually on special days such as Chinese New Year. During childhood, there was no active questioning of the purpose behind the religious rituals and practices. Subjective

experience of these religious occurrences ranged from positive, neutral, indifferent and negative. Some participants had family members who were serious Buddhist practitioners. These elders studied Buddhist texts, practiced Buddhist principles in their daily living and engaged in meditation. Their religious practice extended far beyond the more folkloric aspects of religion passed down between generations. These elders left a distinct impression on some of the participants through their religious practices such as chanting sutras, reading Buddhist texts, applying Buddhist teachings, attending meditation retreats, etc. To illustrate, Dragon talked about his aunt who introduced Buddhist practice to him at an early age. He said her influence left a deep impact on him, and to this day, he still thinks about how much he learned from her. Here's an excerpt from Dragon about the way his aunt treated him and the lasting impact she left on him:

*“Later on as my aunt reached a higher understanding of Buddhism so to speak, she started teaching...it's different when a parent or a close member of your family is giving you advice just the advice vs. the advice that has some Buddhist teaching you kinda know the difference so she started doing this she started giving me advice based on Buddhist practices. I understand more as I grow up. I realize she's very inviting in her advice. She doesn't say you have to do this, she says you'd better do this because...it's very interesting. Buddhist teachings, they explain things it's because when they say don't be attached to something (they explain it to you) because if you're attached to that these are the things that can happen. Her advice is like that (she explains it to you) don't do this because vs. don't do this because I said, so she'll say don't do this because it's not good for you. Don't smoke because it's not good for your health. You're going to feel it in 30 or 40 years vs. somebody who says don't smoke so it's a little bit more inviting. Now that you ask about this, her advice also I feel it's easier to follow. She may be saying the same thing my mother is saying but it sounds different. It's easier to follow. It's much more agreeable and frankly I don't see her as needing me to do things a certain way.”*

*Personhood.* Personhood is first described by the participants' self-account of their personality. Generally, all participants described themselves as quiet, somewhat reserved individuals, who were more likely to keep to themselves. In their development

into their personhood, participants' encountered obstacles in their lives that were difficult to overcome (refer to Poignant life experiences in Section II Turning Towards Buddhism of Textural Description). They all showed initiative in attempting to address these obstacles the best way they could with resources available to them. There was a strong and active desire to survive or to enhance their life experiences, rather than just passively give into encountered obstacles. Resources usually came in the form of social support from family members, (mental health) professionals and friends. Cumulative learning throughout the development of their personhoods was prevalent, more so than cathartic learning. That is, participants were more likely to learn in a gradual iterative manner as opposed to having spontaneous moments of enlightenment. To illustrate cumulative versus cathartic learning, here are some excerpts from Sun experiencing both types of learning.

In the following example of cumulative learning, Sun talked about how long it took for her to realize the notion, that a woman must stay in a marriage forever, was not working out for her:

*“Yes, but b/c of me you know, you think all the women are married, you belong to the family. You're supposed to give everything to the family. That's why when we get divorced, when we get under the pressure, those things...I'm not that bad (feelings of deep guilt and shame over divorce). When we get married, always think about the family should be together, especially when tolerance so much (after she tolerated her husband for as long as she had). But in the end, it's not like, that I have lots of negative emotions because I'm not restless. I should have more than this (peace in her life).”*

*“No matter what you are, (I used to believe that) you're supposed to stay in the marriage. That's why maybe I had to go through the same problem (over and over again), then finally you know, I do have that question (questioned the notion of staying in a marriage forever). Like I said, I circle and circle for a long, long time.”*



And here's an example of cathartic learning where Sun talked about visiting a psychologist for the first time:

*"That's what my medical doctor recommended. I go see (a psychologist). When I go there, 45 minutes, I kept talking because I never talk to people that much. He just let me keep talking. That's why right now, I feel for the people who come in (and want to talk). I let them talk."*

Participants engaged in different aspects of cumulative learning. For example, coming to a realization about something that they were unaware of in the past. It could be a faulty belief system, most likely affecting them in a negative manner. As a result, reevaluation was necessary to put this new awareness to good use and examine the pros and cons of different options. This often led to reframing of a situation, focusing and maximizing on the positive as opposed to negative characteristics of obstacles. A balanced view was achieved when participants viewed their situations in a less dualistic manner and simply accepted all aspects of their life experiences. Acceptance often led to greater ability to be cognitively, emotionally and behaviorally flexible in managing life's difficulties. Dragon provided a particularly compelling description of cumulative learning in the context of his developing capacity for compassion, encompassing many of the steps described:

*"I don't know, previously before my aunt took me to the retreat, I got in trouble so much and so it's easy for me to ask for forgiveness because that's what kids do when they get in trouble. They try to get away from the punishment. They try to get away with something to avoid the punishment but in doing so a lot of the tendencies...you might say you're sorry without any meaning in it just to get out of the problem...like your parents caught your hand inside the cookie jar, the first thing you say is I'm sorry. Maybe you don't mean that but in that situation for a lot of times someone gave compassion to the kinds of punishment I should receive for the bad things that I did, then I probably would not be feeling that much suffering. (Later you don't try to get away with it but negotiate your punishments), maybe if I can just, instead of not watching TV for one week, (I can negotiate to) just one day, you know, unless it's a severe punishment but in order to get to that level you're trying to get compassion from someone (you're at*

*somebody's mercy). So I find the very first time I learned about compassion it's how should people be compassionate to me but later on when I progressed through my studies in the experiences that I have, I realize it's not (just about what I want). In many cases if I am in trouble, if I depend on somebody else's compassion, (I'm aware that I'm receiving compassion and makes me more aware about) how do I give compassion to others. It changes a little bit over time."*

## *Section II: Turning Towards Buddhist Practice*

*Poignant life experiences.* Participants had formative life experiences that gently prodded them towards Buddhist practice in the future. However, poignant life experiences were more forceful life events that accelerated participants' interest in Buddhism and Buddhist practice. Participants experienced both positive and negative poignant life experiences throughout their lives. They did not immediately turn to Buddhist practice after the occurrence of a poignant event. It was common though for all participants to seriously reflect upon the factors that might have created these negative life experiences and how to avoid them in the future. As a result participants were much more susceptible to the pursuit of Buddhist practice. The following are sample poignant life experiences for each of the participants.

Smart:

*"Graduate school was different and challenging. The professors had different expectations. Unlike undergrad, you had to think independently and contribute new and significant knowledge. There was a period of adjustment. Life was consumed by studies. It was a good opportunity to learn about problem-solving skills on my own that can be applied to any challenging situation, worldly, mundane, spiritual. How do you keep your cool and find a good way to work through ambiguous situations. The daily chanting and family support helped."*

Monkey King:

*"(My wife) had very severe mental illness. She went to the hospital. She moved out a couple of times. She imagined she had a lot of money, that she could find someone (else). Finally, she could not live that way and I took her back, so on and off like this for 10 to 15 years. Finally, she started doing things that*

*were out of control. She stole in dept stores, spent all her money, she pulled out her 401 K and spent all of her money.”*

Sun:

*“It's getting to the point already, 20 years (of emotional abuse). You already take all the tolerance. Getting to, you know, say next minute I will be going over. I'm getting too afraid of exploding because also at the same time my sister...because she had a condition. She live in my house, the one who had nervous breakdown. I don't want to be like her. See she's my savior too, an example. I don't want to be like her. The women of course love the children the most. Why we have to take 20 years because the children. You always think a man will change. They will learn so and... Getting to the worse because the more you take (her ex-husband) the more you give. Right, they never, it never ends. With the counselor, (her husband) says 'I've got no problem, she's the one who always finds something wrong.' That's why I say I even almost go into a nervous breakdown, going that much, he didn't even know that's how much (she was suffering).”*

Upasika:

*“I guess so, that's why I say I've already lived a full life. Now that I see through our relationship for 5 years. Even my mom told me that he's (her husband) changed, not in a good way. My mom is really good at reading people, sometimes she gives me examples of how he treats me and he's not supposed to do that. I guess maybe because I already embrace Buddhist practice so I didn't really pay attention to those details. But now my mom told me. I can kinda see her point of view. That's another reason, my mom supports me if I want to become a nun. I even told her I don't want to do it anymore (stay married).”*

Silent Monkey:

*“People keep telling us we're all created equal. Everybody is supposed to be equal, but it turns out it is not. In Malaysia, it's not equal at all because if you're not of a particular race or belong to a particular religion, you don't have the same privileges. People will see you as strange (Islam is the main religion in Malaysia). In the 60's before the Vietnam war, the Buddhist monks set themselves on fire because at that time, the president of Vietnam was catholic. The first lady was not his wife, it's his brother's wife and she was pretty mean and nasty to the Buddhist community. And they feel they have to protest and let the world know how they were treated. There were a lot of restrictions put on their religious practice and then a couple of times in the newspaper there were news of monks gathering together, praying in the open spaces of a market. A lot of monks gathered together. There was a monk who sat down and another poured gasoline on him and set him on fire. It happened a number of times. I saw the newspapers when I was in Malaysia. I thought it was so unfair.”*

Dragon:

*“It was around 88 when I was around 10 years old. One of my aunts, she's from my father's side of the family, her husband passed away. That year, she had a lot of struggles with the passing of her husband so she went and looked for comfort, knowledge, find reasons, why, explanations during that time. She found Buddhism. I noticed she started reading a lot more books, watched videotapes, started to learn more. She took me on a 5-day meditation camp. There were other teenagers, a little bit older than me, 15, 16 year olds. My brother was also in the camp with me. He wasn't taking it seriously because to him it was more of a playground. It was in the suburbs, away from the city. It's a 5-day practice where you solely focus on meditation. The place was to be built as a temple. It started as a small house. And there's a monk, we don't call him fashi because it's Theravada tradition we call he bande. I think that's Pali. He runs the boot camp. Yeah, she took me there, they taught meditation for a big portion of the day. Within a day's schedule, it would be spent on meditation in the morning, midday and afternoon. There are chants too, after each of the chants he would talk about a chapter, specific areas in more general terms, not specific teachings. For example, he talked about the teaching of compassion, from there I started to get more interested. I found myself more agreeable with the things he said.”*

### *Section III: Buddhist Practice*

*Process of Buddhist practice.* Participants experienced some kind of initial interest which began their journey toward Buddhist practice; this sparked interest motivated them to go deeper in their commitment to Buddhist practice. Sometimes it was the aforementioned poignant life experiences. Other times, participants simply were interested in being part of a social support network. All participants, at some point, were struck by Buddhist teachings and/or practice, experienced greater curiosity towards Buddhist philosophy and practice, and developed a sense of connection to Buddhism. For example, Smart became curious about Buddhism after observing a college peer engaging in Buddhist practices. Or, participants simply read books that help one to create more meaning about the grander scheme of things in life. Initial motivation would

sometimes lead to a search for people with similar interests and would inevitably lead the participants to a Buddhist temple.

Participants were motivated to pursue their exploration further as they found Buddhism to have a rather inviting style. In comparison, Dragon and Upasika were actively recruited by Christian groups on campus when they each arrived at their respective universities in the United States. They felt their recruitment experience with Christian groups was in stark contrast to how they joined their current Buddhist temple and sangha. They both felt their experience with Buddhism was more positive and in that they did not feel pressured to join the Buddhist temple.

As participants encountered Buddhist texts (with Buddha's teachings), monastic staff encouraged them to actively question Buddhist teachings, opposed to simply accepting Buddhism in blind faith. There was an encouragement of self-paced and self-directed exploration, while discovering this philosophical perspective. In fact, as shown by the vows that formally induct a participant into the FGS Buddhist Order, it is ultimately up to the participants to decide whether they are prepared and ready to embark on such a commitment. Other factors, besides the initial interest, that motivated participants to carry on with their Buddhist practice were faith in Buddhist teachings (i.e. belief that Buddhist teachings provide a framework for understanding the meaning and purpose of life), and the real benefits that come with Buddhist practice both for oneself and others, proven by countless numbers of practitioners. Family support helped to reinforce this initial enthusiasm for Buddhism. Family members were not necessarily Buddhist practitioners, but participants considered their family's approval of their Buddhist practice important. As participants became more involved in Buddhist practice,

they began to formulate short-term and long-term goals for how they desired to develop in the future. Short-term goals for the most part had to do with a desire to achieve mental balance: being more present, objective, and calm. Long-term goals were invariably, to seek liberation from suffering and reach enlightenment, if not in this lifetime then in subsequent ones.

Once goals were set, participants were more inclined to move through the different types of vows (Triple Gem, 5 Precepts and bodhisattvas), and in this way become formal lay practitioners and deepen their commitment to Buddhist practice. This coincided with their developing Buddhist identity. Participants were comfortable labeling themselves as Buddhists, and felt increasingly that they belonged to a community of like-minded practitioners. Most importantly, participants made a conscious effort to practice Buddhist teachings in their daily living. Persons of influence played a key role in helping participants solidify their Buddhist identity and become more active Buddhist practitioners. These individuals were typically serious practitioners themselves, too, such as friends, partners, family members, and Buddhist monastics.

Motivation for Buddhist practice plays a major role in the beginning of a participant's foray into Buddhism. Motivation can increase participants' readiness to absorb Buddhism into their lives, helping them move to a point in their Buddhist practice where they actively apply Buddhist teachings in their daily living. All participants emphasized the importance of right volition in their practice, stating that right volition or intention can help one to build up the merits necessary for good karma that is, to send one on a faster path to enlightenment. Smart likened right volition to racking up good points in a bank, the more you have the sooner one will achieve enlightenment. Volition is the

intention that drives the practices behind 3-fold training (the Buddhist training model to help one reach enlightenment, including components of morality, meditation and wisdom).

Morality involves helping oneself first, usually through a thorough understanding of the Four Noble Truths: accepting that suffering exists, understanding the root causes of suffering (attachment/craving), realizing that it is possible to reach enlightenment and following a prescribed path. This morality encouraged participants to be responsible for their actions, to choose actions wisely, because for every action there is a chain reaction of cause and effect, which can either build positive or negative karma. The second morality is bodhisattva morality, helping others end their cycle of suffering. All of the participants practiced this morality by volunteering at the temple.

For meditation, all participants agreed that it is important to find a technique that fits your needs. They all believed in the importance of being meditative (or reflective) in their daily living. However, some participants had a more expansive definition of meditation. Upasika, Sun, Smart and Silent Monkey deemed that with deepening Buddhist practice, they were beginning to realize meditation was an essential component for the process of decentering. For them, meditation had a calming affect, helped them to concentrate, and increased an awareness of their thoughts and reactions. Two of the most advanced practitioners, Sun and Smart, were able to gain wisdom through meditation, which is the ability to see things as they are, to accept them and to observe them with equanimity, without judgment.

Meditation was described as a microtechnique of decentering and it can fast track one's goal to gain wisdom and reach enlightenment. This is possible because through

meditation one becomes intimate with what is defined as self or ego. Participants realized through their practice, just how strongly they are attached to their egos. Smart described that eventually through mindfulness meditation; he was able to gain the following insight: the ego is impermanent at the core because even the ego “arises and passes” each and every time. In the end, there is no such thing as mine. All participants had an intellectual understanding of the relationship between the concepts of emptiness and dependent origination. That is, they understood that self/ego is empty at the core, and is quite dependent on others to define it. However, Smart mentioned that he made great strides in achieving this awareness at a visceral level, after attending a 10-day Vipassana meditation retreat for the first time. Before the retreat, he began to doubt whether he would ever gain wisdom and reach enlightenment, simply by reading books, applying Buddhist teachings in his life, chanting sutras, and volunteering at the temple. Now after the retreat, he said he continues to engage in his repertoire of Buddhist practices, but is able to complete these tasks and live life with greater meditateness. Meditation reportedly sharpened his ability to be present and objective from that of a “torch flame to that of a laser beam.” He has also transferred his meditative practice from solitary confinement to in-vivo situations in his daily life, such as when he interacts with family members and co-workers. The following is an excerpt of Smart talking about how he practiced decentering:

*“It turns meditation was something...the technique was such that it was very scientific, very logical. The technique is to train the mind through focus. You observe the sensations throughout your body and not just observe the sensations but observe the nature of the sensation. Every sensation whether it's strong or weak, whether it's pleasant or unpleasant has the same nature of arising and passing away. (Becoming aware of) impermanence is the meditation object of this technique and once you start to realize deeper and deeper by experience the nature of the sensation then you are naturally starting*



*to let go attachment of self. You start to understand every emotion rises and passes away. Even your body, what constitutes your body, the material, the atoms, those arise and pass away. This can be experienced at the advanced level. At the beginning level you experience sensations that rise and pass away, whether it's pleasant or unpleasant. Before practicing we have a tendency to have a craving for it, you want more of the pleasant sensation. For example, I notice when I'm eating chocolate it's very pleasant, I want more of it that's a craving. Craving becomes attachment so to break that chain, that cycle, I observe the sensation. It's a very pleasant sensation but I'm also seeing that it arises and (it'll go away) it might stay for a while but it goes away and once you realize every sensation exhibits the same nature the same characteristic so you grow less and less attached to them, but you don't reject them. You just notice that pleasant sensation. I don't develop craving towards it, unpleasant sensations when I'm having a heated argument, when I'm feeling angry. There's a lot of unpleasant sensations in my body, a lot of heat, a lot of tension. I don't reject them. I just observe them as they are in a non-judgmental way and so by doing that it allows one to let go from the different kinds of attachments, whether I'm attaching to greed or I'm attaching to certain addictions. I liked to eat chocolates. Now I can see it in a perspective. This is good, it doesn't preclude me to enjoy it, but when I am, I can say this is something I like but I don't develop a craving for it. When I don't have it I don't constantly think I want chocolate I want chocolate so you can see the change. I like it. I enjoy it and that's ok so seeing things as they are and not the way we want it to be.”*

As participants continued to engage in Buddhist practices, they also alluded to a shifting in their perspective over time where they were able to see things with greater objectivity. This is the same aforementioned objectivity a person gains when they practice meditation, although this phase addresses the process rather than the outcome by which a participant reaches that objectivity. Participants were able to begin shifting in their perspective through cumulative learning for the most part and to a smaller extent through cathartic learning (refer to previous definitions and examples of cumulative vs. cathartic learning; also, this shifting in perspective will be addressed in greater detail in the last step of analysis: textural-structural composite). For example, participants often talked about becoming more aware of their habitual patterns (usually in a mundane sense), and learning to take on a more balanced view in any given situation. They

practiced at being more conscious of their behaviors and not simply reacting to situations. There was a decreased attachment to positive outcomes or to avoidance of negative outcomes (since this is also an attachment). This had an impact on participants' ability to reduce their spectrum of emotional reactivity, (i.e. moving from upset, frustrated, depressed to despair), and would even allow them to be more flexible cognitively, emotionally and behaviorally. Hence, participants continued to encounter obstacles as they practiced to let go of their habitual patterns over time (cumulative learning), however the resulting emotions were less intense with increased Buddhist practice. Participants talked about applying Buddhist principles they learned especially when faced with obstacles in life. Obstacles could be specific such as not being consistent and disciplined in their meditation practice, or a broader obstacle such as letting go of their attachment to relationships. Throughout their cumulative learning, participants talked about a number of truths to stand by in their Buddhist practice: taking the initiative to experience teachings for yourself; using life as a training ground; being in the moment so as to focus on the process and not the outcome (which can become an attachment); and engaging in a gradual process of change that deepens one's practice. Smart talked about his experience of cumulative learning in the following excerpt:

*“Yeah, but sometimes the problem might get bigger so because as you are purifying yourself, you're getting closer to the bottom of the problem. The smaller ones no longer bother you it's the bigger ones you're starting to see, to experience what the attachment is, what am I so strongly attached to. Sometimes you'll surface up, to become a very strong emotion, very overpowering, very overwhelming. I'm speaking from personal experience so sometimes it can be very overpowering and one needs to be very careful. So sangha can be a very good source of support and guidance but one ultimately needs to take refuge in oneself. No one else can provide true refuge. It's only our own effort and our proper striving that can provide true refuge. When something arises it can be very mundane things. Somebody perhaps could be speaking harshly when you don't expect it, at that moment, do I still react to it? Maybe at that point I can*

*fully justify that I didn't do anything wrong. It's just this person's fault. It's very easy to have anger at that point. Why is this person shouting at me, but if one truly practices, one is able to stop for a moment, to not react, see what's going on and then take proper action. Maybe calm the person, maybe trying to find out, perhaps that person has a misunderstanding, perhaps that person has certain biases, so those are the things that I call problems, of the challenges that come up everyday life."*

*Outcomes of Buddhist practice.* All participants wished to continuously and incrementally develop compassion and gain wisdom through their Buddhist practice. They felt these were important outcomes in their attempts to reach enlightenment. Participants practiced at empathizing with others' suffering, and being compassionate even under the most trying circumstances, such as when someone may have egregiously wronged them in the past. Participants worked to achieve a level of equanimity, not to be equated with indifference nor apathy. They strove to achieve equanimity, especially in situations where emotions were running high. In these instances, they practiced viewing situations objectively, working at not being overwhelmed and swayed by strong positive emotions nor negative ones, but rather to be present with emotions and contemplate on them. Participants were able to gain wisdom when their perspectives were not all-or-nothing, positive or negative, but rather when they were able to see phenomena as they are. They mentioned that wisdom is achieved when one is able to move beyond these kinds of dualities in their perspective-taking. Participants also expressed a third outcome, a deep sense of joy. Joy is also enhanced by the outcomes of compassion and wisdom. Participants described this joy as peaceful and simple. They differentiated it from the mundane kind of happiness that is typically associated with worldly experiences.

*Structural Description*

The structural description is also written by relying on clustered themes developed. As such, the major sections and themes are the same as those delineated in the textural description. However, instead of asking the question what, it asks the question how. In this case, the data is examined more critically resulting in a deeper analysis. The researcher engages in imaginative variation where they look for all possible meanings and has the potential to create new meanings. I achieved this by looking at the thematic and non-repetitive significant statements I used to write up the textural description. Whereas in the textural description, my main task was to delineate categories, in writing up the structural description, I explored and contrasted the nuances in non-repetitive significant statements within and between participants.

*Section I: Formative Life Experiences*

*Sociocultural background.* The older participants spoke more about political and economic instability as a result of the Communist Regime in China. In contrast, the younger participants talked about power differentials as a result of being ethnic minorities in their native Asian countries. Older participants often suffered from circumstances that were outside of their control, whereas younger participants tended to experience suffering as a result of being in situations that they chose to be a part of. The key distinction is degrees of choice over one's life circumstances. In addition, older participants tended to work through their suffering in a collectivist manner whereas the younger participants tended to be more individually-focused, taking care to look after themselves.

*Family influence.* The aforementioned generational differences in sociocultural background also occur in family influence. Younger participants tended to describe their

family experiences in more intimate terms, getting into the nitty-gritty details of relationship dynamics. Data showed that participants' parents provided strong and concrete guidance on moral development. Compassion was not as directly conveyed between participants and their parents, although this does not mean there was a lack of development in this area. Participants learned about compassion by watching their parents' interactions with others and modeling after them. Participants talked about learning strong moral principles from their parents and elders growing up. Hence, participants were taught about compassion, but not in the most obvious and direct manner such as when they were taught about morality. Dragon went further and connected the relationship between morality and compassion.

*Family of origin's religious practice.* Persons of influence tended to leave an impression on the participants' religious/spiritual development. Although all participants were introduced to Buddhism at an early age, Dragon was the only participant who received a formal introduction into Buddhist practices. His aunt enrolled him in a meditation boot camp, and he said he continues to think and talk about how this experience has left a lasting impression on him.

*"It's more like this. Even up to now, there are few instances when I think that was a wowing experience. That experience is more of a reference book. You have it on your shelf and you always go back and look, like a dictionary. If you don't know a word, you go back and take a look at it. That experience is like that. I often go back and visit it in my head. It doesn't give me answers but it gives me comfort. I've been there, I've done things... that I did there... the fact that it changed me in many ways... I don't recall the specific ways or the how's and what's more the overall focus I was in."*

*Personhood.* Cumulative learning during the more formative years in life occurred haphazardly. The expressions "hit the ground running" and "get your feet wet" accurately capture the experience of cumulative learning during this phase. Participants

coped by impulsively reacting to the needs and demands of their situation at hand. This was particularly true when adult support was not readily available. Male participants tended to cope by externalizing whereas female participants tended to internalize.

The following is an excerpt from Upasika talking about how she coped with her parents' discord as a child:

*“I started get used to it. In a way, maybe it's not considered letting go, but once you become used to something, it's like you're immune to it.”*

Here's another excerpt from Monkey King talking about how as a 10 year old he survived his parents' absence during the Cultural Revolution:

*“Those people are like gangsters because of their background. They came from the working class during the cultural revolution. They were number one so they got raised (stature). Most of Red Guards, they came from two main sources. They came from families like these ones or from families with high-ranking officials. These are two main groups so I made some friends with people there...so that's why you don't get hurt or not be bullied up by someone, push you around. You don't need to be protected as long as you associate with them. You have friends with them then no one will touch you and also I don't look down on people. The other people around me are friends so I didn't get any bad treatment at all.”*

As I read through these and similar excerpts, I detected resourcefulness and resiliency in the participants' when faced with adverse life events. For example, as she got older in her college years and afterwards, Upasika took the initiative to work through her difficulties by reaching out to others. Participants engaged in a cumulative process when coping with their lives' problems, laying the groundwork for how they coped with problems as time passed. My sense is that participants did not simply give up when faced with difficulties but rather they continued to look for ways to cope and survive. This self-starting initiative may very well have contributed to their interest in Buddhism.

*Section II: Turning Towards Buddhist Practice*

*Poignant life experiences (Refer to Poignant life experiences under Section II of Textural Description for narratives).* Some of the participants perceived that they had suffered deeply in the past as a result of negative life events. Depending on how much time had elapsed between the event and their actual Buddhist practice, the negative life events contributed to whether one would rely heavily, almost with a sense of urgency, on Buddhism to cope with or to take away their suffering. For example, Upasika is currently deeply unhappy in her married life and is seriously considering a monastic life. She said her mother has given her blessing to pursue this path.

*Section III: Buddhist Practice*

*Process of Buddhist practice.* There is a general temporal progression in Buddhist practice, described in these texts, running parallel to 3-Fold Training (Morality, Meditation and Wisdom). All participants were familiar with the 3-Fold Training and actively engaged in it. Participants tended to build on their initial interests in Buddhist practice by being increasingly ready to practice it at a deeper level. This increased subsequent **motivation**, which made it easier for participants to identify their **goals** (intentions) for Buddhist practice and with the right **volition** (attitude). This foundation allowed participants to engage in mindful living, a combination of **morality** (towards self and others) and **meditation** practices to help one gain **wisdom** and compassion. This cumulative learning over time created an internal shifting for the participants, whether it was cognitive, emotional and/or behavioral. Participants experienced their Buddhist practice in this chronological order, especially in the beginning. In this sense, Buddhist practice unfolded in a linear fashion. This data will be further analyzed in the textural-

structural composite, so as to delve into the actual essences and mechanisms in the process of decentering.

Although the progression of Buddhist practice is presented in a linear fashion, a cyclical spiral happens to be more of an accurate description of Buddhist practice. All participants have come to this realization, practice in real life does not always follow a straight and narrow line. Instead, there is a great deal of synchronicity between the different phases of Buddhist practice. To illustrate, Smart did not simply stop practicing morality when he incorporated meditation into his Buddhist practice, rather it was integrated into his learning process. Sometimes, participants talked about applying both morality and meditation practices at the same time. For example, participants volunteer at the temple to work on their bodhisattva morality. At the same time, they were using the temple as a safe training ground to practice their meditateness in an in-vivo environment.

*Outcomes of Buddhist practice.* Participants spoke about the importance of attaining compassion and wisdom as a way of reaching enlightenment. Moral training from childhood enabled participants' ability to gain compassion and wisdom through Buddhist practice. These outcomes were not experienced in exclusion of one another. For example, with deepening practice, some participants realized that if one is able to engage in wisdom, or an objective, fair and balanced view of situations, they are less likely to be attached to particular outcomes, be less judgmental or reactive of themselves and others, and have the capacity to practice compassion.



*Textural-Structural Composite*

The textural-structural composite attempts to further integrate data already provided by the clustered themes, textural description and structural description (See Table 2). This is an opportunity to look at the data in a more holistic manner and gain a more integrative understanding for the phenomenon of decentering. A textural-structural composite allows the analysis to move beyond the more obvious chronological framework preset by the order of data shared from Interviews 1 to 3. This description also delineates three sections: 1) Preparing for Buddhist Practice (Conation), 2) Practice in Action (Morality and Meditation), and 3) Change from the Inside Out (Mechanisms of Change). Seeing this, the chronological ordering of data is still apparent. At the same time, as one continues to read, there are two major segments of results that emerge. The first segment is the visible components of Buddhist mindfulness practice (sections 1 and 2 – conation, morality and meditation), merging all three sections found in textural and structural descriptions: Formative Life Experiences, Turning Towards Buddhism, and Buddhist Practice. The second segment is new to the textural-structural composite, it highlights the not so visible component of Buddhist mindfulness practice (section 3 – mechanisms of change) such as the essences and underlying mechanisms that propel change and create outcomes for individuals engaged in the process of decentering. Analytical data for this component was largely created from the subsection of Process of Buddhist Practice under the section of Buddhist Practice in both the textural and structural descriptions. This component focuses on delineating the essences found in the phenomenon of decentering.

Table 2.

*Summary of analyzed results in order of analysis: Themes, textural description, structural description, and textural-structural composite.*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Texture and Structure Descriptions (data for each is categorized under the same sections)</b>	<b>Texture- Structure Composite</b>
1. Sociocultural background 2. Family influence 3. Family of origin’ religious practice 4. Participant’s personhood	1. Formative life experiences	1. Preparing for Buddhist practice (Conation)
5. Poignant life experiences	2. Turning towards Buddhist practice	
6. Process of Buddhist practice 7. Outcomes of Buddhist practice	3. Buddhist practice	2. Practice in action (Morality and meditation)
		3. Changing from the inside out (Mechanisms of change)

*Section I: Preparing for Buddhist Practice*

*Motivation.* Participants were initially attracted to Buddhist practice for a variety of reasons (i.e. searching for a deeper meaning in life, self-healing and ending suffering, a sense of ethnic belonging, for a social network of like-minded individuals). At a deeper examination, all participants had a proven record of having the initiative to work through either minor or major problems in their lives. These were self-directed, self-reliant and independent individuals. Some had even gone through highly poignant, negative life experiences, which then bolstered their motivation for Buddhist practice. All participants were also ethnic Chinese and grew up being exposed to Buddhism through their family at an early age. This bred a sense of comfort and familiarity when they encountered Buddhism once again in their adulthood. As such it is likely that this predisposed participants to be open towards and comfortable with Buddhist practice. Accounting for all these deeply-rooted factors, participants came into Buddhism highly motivated and ready to explore it, if not immediately then soon afterwards.

*Goal-setting.* Participants were motivated to embark on this journey of Buddhist practice, and they learned about Buddhism at a pace that was comfortable for them. These practitioners had the freedom to participate in any number of activities taking place at their temple (or sangha – Buddhist community). The texts they read and the monastics at the temple encouraged them to actively question what they were learning. In this vein, participants took time to learn about Buddhist teachings, asking questions whenever they arose. In some ways this was a perfect match between a participant's stage of readiness and the "practice intervention" they were involved in. It is a complimentary mix of stimulating learning with enough space to reflect so as to not get overwhelmed. It is

within this space, that participants began to frame what they would like to get out of Buddhism, to establish short-term and long-term goals of Buddhist practice.

*Persons of influence.* Participants were initially influenced by their parents who modeled religious rituals for them. They followed their parents' religious footsteps, some had reactions, but none questioned the meaning behind their family's religious practices much. In the early stages of influence, participation was passive with a tweak of interest here and there arising from someone in the family or in their friendship network who practiced a brand of Buddhism that was beyond the folkloric rituals passed down through generations. As participants became more active and serious practitioners themselves, they encountered more individuals who were serious and advanced Buddhist practitioners. They chose to develop friendships with these individuals, turn to them for support in their own practice. And unlike their formative years, now they were proactive in seeking advice from these individuals to help further their own Buddhist practice.

#### *Section II: Practice in Action*

*Buddhist identity.* A Buddhist identity was already forged from an early age for all participants. But for the participants, there was also an increasingly conscious choice to become more actively involved in their Buddhist practice. Participants were no longer passive subjects of Buddhist practice. The more participants exposed themselves to Buddhist teachings and activities at the temple, the more comfortable they felt about taking vows to formally establish their Buddhist identity.

*Mindful living (or 3-fold training).* Participants engaged in 3-fold training focusing on different components with volition (of morality and meditation; wisdom is more of an outcome from the practices of morality and meditation), and in varying

degrees of intensity. Invariably all participants started off with morality, working on understanding the meaning of life and what binds them to their cycle of suffering. They then increased their bodhisattva morality, that is, engaging in activities that helped them to share compassion with others. In addition, they could also assist anyone who was interested in understanding the cycle of suffering, letting them know that there is a way out. The focus was on what you're doing in the world and how you're letting the world interact with you. This progression of Buddhist training is very similar to and runs parallel to the participants' moral development while under their family's influence, namely their parents' influence. Participants' parents would actively model moral behavior, and along the way, they would learn about compassion, usually indirectly as a result of a punishment, and The Golden Rule. The participants mentioned the morality learned earlier in life was a good foundation for Buddhist practice of morality. Buddhist morality touches on the same basics learned earlier in life (no lying, no killing, etc.). Participants also learned about how one is conditioned and behaves in a way that increases suffering. They learned that there are solutions available to begin the process of reconditioning (or decentering). Participants experienced the practice of morality in two different ways. Morality training was more knowledge-based when learning about basic Buddhist teachings (encapsulated in the 4 Noble Truths), and more skills-based when engaging in activities. Morality training was performed while applying the right volition. It was important for the participants to want to pursue morality training out of their own volition, and not expect something in return. They believed that with the right volition they would be able to share their compassion with all sentient beings. It is very much a self-driven, intensive process of reconditioning requiring a great deal of

discipline. The morality phase maximizes on skills already learned earlier in life and building from that foundation. This allowed participants to gently immerse themselves into the world of Buddhism, and allowed them to make sense of Buddhist teachings in their own way. Practice of morality not only prepared or readied participants for the next phase, meditation, but it also increased participants' motivation as they continued on to the next phase. That is, progression in Buddhist practice has a built-in mechanism for motivation. Given this brief description, morality is an essential early practice component because it prepares participants for the next step, namely, meditation practices.

The next training component, meditation, is what I would refer to as the hallmark practice of Buddhism. There are many different Buddhist meditation techniques. All participants practiced beginner's meditation techniques. The main goal behind these techniques is to calm distracted minds and increase the ability for concentration. Smart and Sun were the only two participants who moved beyond these beginner's meditation techniques. Smart talked about using insight meditation techniques to help him develop an awareness of his self/ego (the hardest attachment to let go) and observing its impermanent nature, where thoughts rise and pass. Eventually he came to the realization that one suffers when holding onto things as if they were static, that the true nature of anything is change and impermanence, rising and passing. Smart was able to viscerally define his ego and see through its impermanent nature and emptiness. Smart's understanding of the concept of impermanence was in direct contrast to all other participants including Sun, the other advanced practitioner. It was as if he had developed an inner microscope and was able to minutely examine his internal experiences.

The difference between morality training versus meditation training is likened to the difference between macro-management versus micro-management of one's attachments. Smart talked about the difference between "torch flame and laserbeam focus" for morality and meditation, respectively. Morality, as demonstrated by all participants, helps one to be aware of everyday attachments, i.e. material things, emotions, thoughts, relationships. Meditation, on the other hand as illustrated by Smart, helps one to have a very internal, sustained, and intimate experience with the phenomenon of impermanence for everything that passes through one's mind (stream of consciousness). It entails training your mind to be internally observant and letting go of whatever passes through your it, over and over again. Smart stated that there was nothing magical about it, in fact, characterizing it as being quite scientific and disciplined work.

Some, participants talked about wanting to be so immersed in meditation that you can meditate, not just in solitude or at the temple (a safe training ground), but maintain a meditative state anywhere, i.e. at home, at work, etc. All participants mentioned that meditation is something that must be experienced by the practitioner, no one else can do it for an individual. Smart talked about taking refuge in oneself. This makes sense because the fight, for a lack of better word, is not against someone but against oneself. He described this as a worthwhile endeavor because he could begin to see a clearer path towards enlightenment as a result of his meditation practice. Monkey King on the other hand, although he understood the benefits of mindfulness meditation, did not believe it was necessary for him to practice meditation. He felt that as long as he believed in the Western Pureland, he could short-circuit the meditation practices. Western Pureland is an utopic way station, where practice conditions are optimal for practitioners to fast track

their path to enlightenment. Monkey King added he also had difficulty sitting still and being disciplined about such practices. Dragon was another participant who thought like Monkey King in regards to meditation. He also commented at one point in his interview after talking about meditation, that he was unsure why he could not seem to make much progress towards his goals of attaining wisdom and compassion. He said he was unsure on how to proceed because “Buddhist teachings seem so abstract.”

To end, I’d like to emphasize some running themes, right volition (evolved from initiative in personhood development and motivation in initial interest of Buddhism) and disciplined practice. They are the pervasive undercurrents that drive morality and meditation practices, in the beginning and also subsequently as practice deepens and these components become more integrated. When obstacles occurred with meditation, some participants talked about returning to the foundation that was forged in the beginning for guidance: morality (Buddha’s teachings) and the sangha.

*Outcomes of Buddhist practice.* All participants engaged in the process of Buddhist practice because they wanted to attain the outcomes that come with it, wisdom and compassion. Their hope was that these outcomes would help them to liberate themselves from suffering and reach enlightenment. So, although there are many desirable outcomes in Buddhist practice, these participants kept it short and simple. They focused on gaining wisdom and compassion in order to achieve liberation from suffering and to reach enlightenment. More often than not, participants talked about gaining wisdom and compassion in the context of goals rather than experiencing the outcomes themselves. This points towards the difficulty of achieving wisdom and compassion. It takes time and intense, disciplined practice to achieve these outcomes. Smart and Sun



experienced the outcomes of wisdom and compassion on a frequent basis. They described themselves as consistently disciplined and committed to a structured Buddhist practice over time (i.e. predictable and integrated practice). And yet for these participants, the presence of outcomes was simply a sign that they were making progress and moving in the right direction. The emphasis was still on the process of Buddhist practice, deriving a sense of faith and experiencing joy while immersed in this process. Participants were not preoccupied with outcomes, as this can become an attachment in itself. Thus, depth of practice served as an indication for whether outcomes were experienced by practitioners or not. Buddhist practice has cumulative effects in that wisdom and compassion increase one's progression towards enlightenment.

*Section III: Changing from the Inside Out*

*Cumulative learning.* Participants engaged in cumulative learning (or learning over time) throughout their lives, from formative times in the past to the present and in the future. And although cumulative learning is an on-going process, there were qualitative differences in how participants engage in cumulative learning before and after their commitment to formal Buddhist practice.

In their earlier years, participants were often “forced” to learn how to cope with poignant events in their lives, invariably of a negative nature, in order to survive these events. The focus therefore was on the outcome not the process, “Can I make it or not?” Participants took on a dualistic view of their problems, they assessed how they could change their situations (reevaluation) with positive or negative actions, and would then try to capitalize on the positive aspects of a situation (reframing). The learning approach over time was more drastic and abrupt with an absolutist bent to it.

Subsequent cumulative learning was more nuanced and sophisticated.

Participants were less likely to simply react to stimuli in their environment. There was an emphasis on self-reflection and self-responsibility. Participants understood they had choices and were responsible for the choices they made in their lives, including decisions made during difficult situations. Reevaluation and reframing still occurred but to a lesser extent. There was a shift to a more balanced viewing of situations: moving from focusing on one aspect or the other, to a more nuanced, more calm, reflective and objective consideration of all aspects in a difficult situation. There was a feeling of equanimity, of acceptance (rather than change), a decreased investment (attachment) in any particular outcome, and more of a flow, where in time solutions would present themselves as opposed to actively searching for one and forcing it to happen. This was apparent in participants' general practice but even more so among those participants who engaged in formal meditation practice. The extremes of emotions were contained and gradually replaced with moderate emotions. This allowed participants to be more flexible and deliberate in the way they managed their cognitions, emotions, and behaviors.

Cumulative learning that occurred during Buddhist practice was process-oriented. Participants were more confident in their practice and more likely to talk about process experiences: the importance of applying Buddhist teachings in their daily living, being in the moment and the gradual process of change. One notable observation is that the ongoing aspect of learning is more applicable for some participants than others, i.e. those who believed in Pureland and have a strong faith that they would go there, were not as active in the process of learning. There is a belief for these practitioners that their

questions of faith have been fully answered, and that all that was required of them was to have strong faith in the existence of a Western Pureland.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The current study attempted to elucidate further on the process of Buddhist decentering through a small sample of Asian American Buddhist lay practitioners, using in-depth interviews and a phenomenological analytical method. Analyzed results from the textural-structural composite show that the process of decentering can be understood through two major segments: the visible components of Buddhist mindfulness practice; and the not so visible, underlying mechanisms that drive the change observed from practice to outcome. The following discussion will expand on these two major segments delineated in the textural-structural composite. In this study, the word mindfulness is used in a broader sense, not just mindfulness in the formal practice of meditation. To capture what is meant by the first segment, visible components of mindfulness practice, let's turn to an often cited definition of mindfulness, "Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). Thus, components of mindfulness practice include conation, that is, one's intention and volition towards Buddhist mindfulness practice; and mindful living, the practices of morality and meditation that cultivate mindfulness as in the form of wisdom and compassion.

Conation is highlighted by the quote fragments of "on purpose" (intention or goal) and "in a particular way" (attitude or volition to carry out the intention). Conation includes qualities one associates with the actual practice of "paying attention" and it is comprised of certain essential ingredients: motivation to drive practice, goal setting (intention for specific outcomes), development of a Buddhist identity and general attitude

or volition towards Buddhist practice. The second component of mindfulness practice is mindful living or “paying attention,” which includes the actual practices of morality and meditation and the resulting outcomes. The other and last segment, underlying mechanisms of Buddhist mindfulness practice, is where we directly address the topic of this study, the process of decentering. Overall, engaging in the components of mindfulness practice can potentiate underlying mechanisms of change, provide a positive framework for adaptive coping strategies, and serve a protective role in one’s physical and mental health (Avants & Margolin, 2004; Shapiro et al., 2006).

Buddhist practice becomes more complex with deepening practice where mindfulness practice components are integrated with one another, and experienced like a cyclical spiral (Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006). Although beginning practitioners are more likely to address conation when they first prepare for Buddhist mindfulness practice, it is not a process that only occurs in the initial stages of practice, separate from the other component of mindfulness practice (morality and meditation practices). To illustrate, conation is integrated into all aspects of mindful living (morality and meditation practices), and is a pervasive undercurrent that drives these practices. The same processes will be experienced simultaneously, repeatedly, each time with a slight qualitative difference. With this in mind, please note that the identified aspects of mindfulness practice (i.e. conation, morality and meditation) will be presented in a linear fashion for ease of explication.

#### Conation: Preparing for Buddhist Practice

To follow through with some semblance of progress, it makes sense that any major project in life would benefit from an individual’s sense of **motivation**. This is

particularly true when the project at hand is about reconditioning one's conditioned mind. No small feat! Shapiro et al. (2006) comment that Western psychology, generally speaking, in their attempt to "extract the essence of mindfulness practice from the original religious/cultural roots" in Buddhism, reduced the phenomenon in such a way that it ironically lost sight of the essence of conation, or the Buddhist intentions of reaching enlightenment (liberation from suffering and delusions) and compassion for all sentient beings. Kabat-Zinn also writes (1990), "Your intentions set the stage for what is possible. They remind you from moment to moment why you are practicing in the first place." "I used to think that meditation practice was so powerful...that as long as you did it at all, you would see growth and change. But time has taught me that some kind of personal vision is also necessary." I agree with these statements, I also think it's important to provide a context for why individuals engage in Buddhist mindfulness practice, what drives them, what is the spirit that motivates them to continue, and how they go about establishing these intentions (to decenter, gradually moving toward the outcome of a decentered state). The strength of a qualitative methodology is that it allows for this kind of comprehensive exploration: identifying the essences of mindfulness practice (the foreground) and answering the "how" questions (the background). The data shows it is possible to further elaborate on conation, one of the core and essential components of Buddhist mindfulness practice.

Participants in this study were initially attracted to Buddhist practice for a variety of reasons, but mainly, wanting to heal and end suffering (of any kind), and reach enlightenment. It helped that personality and cultural factors further enhanced the participants' level of motivation for Buddhist practice. All participants had a history of

being self-directed, having the initiative to rely on themselves to independently problem solve through their life's difficulties before engaging in formal Buddhist practice. My impression was that there was a concerted effort to look for ways to resolve what they perceived as problems or areas of difficulty in their lives. Participants channeled these personal traits of self-initiative and conscientious effort into Buddhist mindfulness practice traits of "taking refuge in oneself" and self-discipline, respectively. Some had even gone through highly poignant, negative life experiences which tended to bolster their motivation for Buddhist practice from a deep place. Culturally speaking, all participants were ethnic Chinese Americans who were comfortable and familiar with Buddhism. They had been exposed to Buddhism at an early age in their native Asian countries, although religious participation was invariably passive such as following ritualistic religious practices in the family passed down between generations. It seems given these predispositions, participants came into Buddhism highly motivated and ready to explore it, if not immediately then soon afterwards.

Once exploration into Buddhism was initiated, motivation was maintained by the fact that anyone can attain enlightenment and by Buddhism's inviting presentation of its teachings and practices. Participants did not feel they were forced to believe in Buddhism, rather they were actively encouraged by millennium-old Buddhist teachings and by monastics at the temple to maintain a healthy skepticism about what they were learning. The perception was that questions were welcomed and openly answered, and that the best way to test the effectiveness of any Buddhist teaching was to take them out for a test-drive in the real world. There were also leaps of faith such as when individuals felt personally connected to teachings from world-renowned Buddhist masters and these

inspired actual practice. Ultimately with continued effort, participants reaped noticeable benefits, which in turn helped to maintain their motivation for Buddhist practice. Most importantly there was a shift from being a passive practitioner earlier in life to one who was ready to be more proactive, initiating the processes of internalization and integration of Buddhist teachings into their daily living.

In Spiritual Self-Schema (3-S) Therapy, a therapy that combines Buddhist and cognitive psychologies for treatment of addictive and HIV risk behavior, the important role of motivation and readiness for change is also explicitly stated (Avants & Margolin, 2004). The authors stress that clients in the precontemplation stage of change may not be ready for participation in 3-S Therapy; clients should be **willing and ready** to enter therapy, to want to examine their drug addiction patterns; they should be interested in experiencing a cognitive shift or to have what Buddhist doctrine refers to as a turning-about; and they should want to develop alternate, adaptive coping patterns that are compatible with the concepts of compassion and harm prevention (Avants & Margolin, 2004). The participants in the current study did not have to address a serious clinical concern like drug addiction nor were they discouraged from Buddhist practice if they initially happened to be in the precontemplative stage of change (unaware of their habitual patterns). However in a similar fashion, through a religious framework and more gradual manner, participants were increasingly and consciously **ready** to examine habitual patterns that foster craving and attachment, and to turn to Buddhist teachings and practices as a way of transforming their lifestyles.

There is also another side to motivation that I'd like to briefly mention before moving on to goal-setting in Buddhist practice. It is not uncommon for Buddhist teachers



to encourage their students to pursue Buddhist practices that match their level of immersion in Buddhist knowledge and point of progression towards the goals of enlightenment and compassion for all sentient beings (Avants and Margolin, 2004). At the same time, Buddhist practice itself is intrinsically set up to increase a participant's level of motivation and readiness for change (Dalai Lama & Geshe Thubten Jinpa, 1996; Dalai Lama & Hopkins, 2003).

Several important Buddhist teachings demonstrate this point of graduated learning that maximizes motivation and readiness for change. The Four Noble Truths, the most basic teachings in Buddhism passed down from Buddha himself, each Truth is set up to increase a practitioner's interest in the next Truth, and hopefully turning interest into practice. For example, if you accept that suffering exists then you'll be curious to know what are the causes of suffering, and if you know that there is a way out of suffering then you'll want to know how to get out of it. I recall when I first learned about the Four Noble Truths, I thought this set up was strange, if somewhat counterintuitive. This was also mentioned by the Dalai Lama in his taped lectures (1996) as he tried to explain the rationale behind the order of Truths. Because intuitively, would you not want to know why suffering exists then assert its existence; and similarly, would you not want to know how to get out of suffering then assert there is a way out of it?

The same goes for the three vows of Triple Gems, 5 Precepts and the Bodhisattvas, which are increasingly advanced vows that allow a layperson to be formally inducted into their Buddhist Order (as formal lay practitioners not monastics), and increasingly affirm their commitment to Buddhist practice. The part I found interesting is that it is the practitioner's choice to decide for themselves when they will be

ready to take on a vow. Again, the vows are set up to motivate a layperson for Buddhist practice, matching them with teachings that they are ready to explore depending on their stage of readiness. It seems to me in Buddhist psychology just like in Western Psychology, such as the Proschaska and DiClemente's (1986) Transtheoretical Model of Change, there is an investment in imbuing concepts of motivation and readiness for change in their practice structure, which then creates observable outcomes in psychological and behavioral change. One can clearly detect the same pattern of training to maximize motivation and readiness for change behind 3-fold Training of Morality, Meditation and Wisdom (this will be discussed in greater detail in "Morality and Meditation"), specifically from more basic morality and meditation practices to more advanced ones. Motivation and readiness for change in both traditions play a key role in a person's search for and attainment of mental well-being.

As participants became more involved in their Buddhist practice, they did so at their own pace and comfort level. Even the most disciplined participants allowed themselves to experience enough new challenges while not overwhelming themselves. It is within this space, that participants began to frame what benefits they wanted to reap out of their Buddhist practice, to establish short-term and long-term goals in their Buddhist practice. It is not at all uncommon for individuals to come into Buddhism because, either consciously or unconsciously, they want to end suffering in their lives and reach enlightenment. In clarifying, this does not suggest an unrealistic ending of suffering where life's problems end and you experience a mundane, ephemeral kind of happiness. I will elaborate on how Buddhist practice helps to end suffering under the second component of mindfulness practice, "Morality and Meditation: Practice in

Action”. For now, the kind of happiness I refer to (and also the participants) is a deep level of happiness or a deep sense of joy that can only occur once you accept suffering exists in life and are willing to face it. Shantideva (1997), a 7<sup>th</sup> century Indian Buddhist contemplative, said this about suffering: “Those seeking to escape from suffering hasten right toward their own misery. And with the very desire for happiness, out of delusion they destroy their own well-being as if it were their enemy” (p. 21).

Buddhism makes **goal-setting (intentions)** easy to achieve if your intention is to end suffering. Beginning practitioners usually take some time to verbalize their goals as they need time to absorb the Buddhist teachings they’re learning (The 4 Noble Truths, learning the Buddhist lingo so to speak). The approach is, practice morality and meditation (and there are many types of morality and meditation practices for which an in-depth discussion is beyond the scope of this study), to cultivate wisdom and compassion, and this will liberate one from suffering and help one to reach enlightenment. The ultimate long-term goals as aforementioned are enlightenment (liberation from suffering and delusion) and compassion for all sentient beings. What’s important to note is the process of goal-setting: one is no longer just desiring for well-being for oneself and others, it is a goal, a stronger and explicit commitment to action through Buddhist mindfulness practice (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006). And what **big** goals: to reach enlightenment and be compassionate to all sentient beings? Is this possible? And for this very same reason, only two of the four participants had experienced the goals of wisdom and compassion as outcomes. One of these participants even talked about the importance of lofty goals as a way of motivating and driving one’s (long and sometimes difficult) practice. This is the other reason why goal-setting is such an

essential ingredient because goals themselves can turn into outcomes with effort and practice. If your goal is liberation from suffering then your outcome is liberation from suffering. In essence, goals play an indispensable role in guiding one's practice towards particular outcomes (Shapiro, 1992).

With the establishment of clearer goals, there is also a stronger commitment to formalizing one's practice. A Buddhist layperson can decide if they are ready to take the vows and become a formal practitioner in their sect. These vows help one to get on a trajectory of increased identification with a **Buddhist identity** and commitment to practice. Formal commitment first involves embracing the Buddha, Dharma (his teachings) and sangha (the Buddhist community – usually the local temple and the larger Sect it belongs to); then practicing the 5 precepts (like the 10 Commandments but much shorter); and finally, modeling oneself after the bodhisattvas (compassionate beings who voluntarily delayed becoming Buddhas in order help all sentient beings). The vows, which are essentially formalized intentions, demonstrate there is an on-going transition in practice, bringing one closer to the reality of goals when they turn into actual outcomes. This is more clearly shown by looking at the outcomes corresponding with each of the aforementioned vows: first, making a commitment to something that is greater than you, to a framework from which to contain and ground one's practice; second, a commitment to working on yourself, to practice wholesome physical, verbal, and mental behaviors that foster one's well-being and consequently those of others (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006); and third, actively modeling after a bodhisattva and sharing your compassion with all sentient beings. The focus is work on self then work with others.

All participants were interested in Buddhism and driven to pursue Buddhist practice from a place of self-interest. This self-interest (motivation) for spiritual self-healing is normal and expected especially in the beginning. I don't believe there's anything wrong with self-interest since it can point us in the right direction at times, as it did with all of these participants. However, as with most things in life when taken to the extreme, if self-interest is all that matters, how will "I" benefit from something, how is this convenient for "me," it has the potential to breed and elicit maladaptive outcomes.

It is common to take on meditative practices so one can reach a higher state of being through physicality (i.e. yoga, tai chi, qi gong) and/or mind (chanting, mindfulness meditation). These practices are generally viewed as beneficial to one's health and are even considered preventative/alternative medicine by some (U. S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2007). However, what if one was to practice yoga without an **attitude (volition)** of "patience, compassion and non-striving" (Shapiro et al., 2006), p.5. Consider a yoga practice gone awry when it's not driven by such attitudinal qualities. There might be a greater potential to push oneself to make the perfect moves, to harshly self-criticize when the moves are not perfect, and to let one's yoga practice define you where it becomes one's sole source of self-esteem. This example of yoga practice cultivates counterproductive outcomes such as self-condemnation, judgment and striving (an indication of over-attachment) (Shapiro et al., 2006).

Pursuing the phenomenon of decentering is a big and lofty goal, sometimes a seemingly impossible goal to achieve. Just consider all the different ways our minds are conditioned to be attached. Because of this, it is equally important to be motivated and to explicitly delineate the attitudinal qualities a practitioner wants to bring to their

mindfulness practice. What then are these attitudinal qualities? Kabat-Zinn (2003, p. 145) writes of “an affectionate, compassionate quality...a sense of openhearted, friendly presence and interest.” Mindfulness practice in this sense is not a cold and sterile clinical practice. It is more accurate to liken it to the Japanese characters for mindfulness which consist of two interactive figures: mind and heart (Santorelli, 1999). Buddhism actively encourages mindfulness practice that is comprised with attitudes of acceptance, kindness and openness, even under the most trying circumstances (Shapiro et al., 2006). I thought it was rather uncanny that all participants stressed the importance of mindfulness practice with right volition. They strongly believed that without right volition, the merits necessary for good karma cannot be accrued, and you need good karma to achieve enlightenment.

To aid in the engagement of these “heart” attitudes, all participants made a conscious effort to include in their sutra chant a segment that reminds them to carry out these attitudinal qualities. Avants and Margolin (2004), also mention these attitudinal qualities in the context of spirituality, and the importance of explicitly integrating them into their 3-S Therapy. These authors concede that spirituality is a complex, wide-ranging, multidimensional concept as proven by prior research (Larson, Swyers, & McCullough, 1998). They also understand that bringing the word “spiritual nature as wholly compassionate” can be construed as “nonempirical” and “metaphysical.” Given these “scientific barriers,” they still believed it was important to ground their therapeutic technique with particular spiritual attitudes for treatment purposes. Spirituality was perceived as do no harm to oneself or others (Arnold, Avants, Margolin, & Marcotte, 2002), and spiritual attitudes were partially characterized by non-judgment, inner peace,

and a sense of interconnectedness with all sentient beings to promote altruistic personal and social values (Avants & Margolin, 2004). Such a spiritual (or heart) attitude of altruism, attached to one's intentions while engaged in mindfulness practices (in the foreground), does contribute, and I would even go as far as to say, drive the process of decentering (in the background).

### Morality and Meditation: Practice in Action

Morality and meditation are the two other, more visible components of mindfulness practice. At this juncture of discussion, all participants talked about what is known in Buddhism as The 3 Trainings or 3-Fold Training consisting of Morality, Meditation and Wisdom. Each of these trainings is comprised of facets belonging to the 8-Fold Path. The Path is the explanatory content of the 4<sup>th</sup> Noble Truth, delineating for practitioners the actual practices that will help them to become decentered and reach the goals of enlightenment and compassion for all sentient beings. Both morality and meditation trainings contribute to the development of compassion for all sentient beings and wisdom (enlightenment), which is more of an outcome from morality and meditation practices. Morality and meditation are experienced simultaneously, in a cyclical spiral as aforementioned, one does not stop being moral when meditating and vice versa. However, it is quite common for teachers and Buddhist texts for beginners to encourage novice practitioners to follow The 3 Trainings in a linear fashion. That is, strengthen their foundation of morality, then move on to concentration/meditation practices, so that eventually both morality and meditation continuously work in conjunction to establish and build one's wisdom. The Dalai Lama (2003, p. 22), succinctly presents the rationale

behind this linear order of practice, and as will be obvious to the reader, the intent is for a radical cognitive shift and not simply a superficial transformation:

- **Morality** training stops external distractions by maintaining mindfulness and conscientiousness with regard to physical and verbal activities, being constantly aware of your physical and verbal acts. Overcoming these obvious distractions makes it possible to overcome subtler internal distractions.
- Concentrated **meditation** creates a state of complete single-mindedness by removing subtle, internal distractions. Achieving a calm abiding of the mind makes it possible for one to remove impediments to proper understanding.
- **Wisdom** or special insight removes faulty mental states at their very roots.

**Morality** training is not unlike the introductory training a student receives in any subject area of study. There is a strong emphasis on learning theories and principles, and solidly grounding oneself in this foundational knowledge before applying it so as to build wisdom and compassion. In some ways, the knowledge one accrues during morality training can be perceived as **knowledge-based** wisdom in contrast to **skills-based** wisdom, seen in more advanced stages of Buddhist mindfulness practice, when one actively applies Buddhist-based moral principles in one's daily living. It helps that Buddhist morality training is an extension or a build-up of moral development while growing up with one's family. In fact, the Five Precepts are common moral themes that all participants were taught to follow in their early years. Moral training in their current Buddhist practice as adults, allowed the participants to consciously explore how they could integrate Buddhist teachings into their daily living, rather than simply following religious rituals passed down from their parents and families. Beyond these common



themes, all participants worked to understand basic Buddhist teachings, especially the Four Noble Truths, and subsequently, at least on an intellectual level, the true impermanent nature of reality which is key to liberation from suffering and delusions (or increased decentering). In this sense, moral training involved taking the time to engage in an intellectual self-understanding of how we condition ourselves to habitual patterns; to understand how habitual patterns can increase attachment and suffering (avoiding the unpleasant and craving the pleasant); and that solutions are available to begin the reconditioning of the mind (or decentering). More specifically, it gave participants the opportunity to shift their focus from an abstract understanding of these concepts to practicing them in their daily lives. This helped participants to become more aware of how they were living their lives, and identifying external distractions that might prevent them from achieving the positive outcomes of attaining wisdom and compassion, as framed by Buddhist philosophy (Dalai Lama, 2003).

Buddhist morality training is also involves building one's compassion for all sentient beings, what is termed as bodhisattva morality (Dalai Lama, 2003). In essence, morality training involves both mindful self-awareness and carrying out compassionate acts for others. This combination of self-work and work-for-others is parallel to Dragon's sentiments about the intimate relationship between morality and compassion: "one learns to be compassionate, to have empathy for others' suffering through moral development." Moral development increases one's self-awareness of how compassion is received from others (a mirroring of kindness). Subsequently, other individuals' compassion towards you can make you more aware of your own suffering; and lastly, it can predispose you to recognize suffering in others more easily and allow you to impart

kindnesses on them. The next training component, **meditation**, is what I would refer to as the hallmark practice of Buddhism. In general, there is a strong tendency to overemphasize its importance even when other practice components (conation and morality) are equally important (or maybe even more important) in the development of mindfulness as framed by Buddhist practice. Participants invariably de-emphasized or demystified this “hallmark” aspect of Buddhist practice by linking it directly to one’s volition in practice. Participants talked about the importance of practicing meditation as framed by a compassionate attitude, where the intention is to calm one’s mind and develop wisdom and compassion towards oneself and others. They also cautioned against using meditation as an opportunistic means to an end where there is a tendency to want to “excel” in the practice of meditation, losing focus of the compassionate framework and letting the practice become an attachment in itself. Mindfulness practice in Buddhism, it seems, is an on-going balancing act or an effort of walking the middle road.

There are many different ways in which participants defined the practice of meditation, mainly, traditional breathing/counting meditations, sutra chants (or prayers), and tai chi. Participants also talked about engaging in meditative living where they were mindful of living their daily lives in a moral and compassionate manner. Rather than being reactive in a habitual manner, some would even visualize a bodhisattva: how might a bodhisattva conduct themselves, especially in morally ambivalent situations and use this as a guide. It is important to acknowledge that different types of meditations, even commonly recognized ones like mantra meditation (sutra chants), yoga, tai chi and qi gong (U.S. Department of Human and Health Services, 2007), and how they relate to the

process of decentering, is beyond the scope of this paper. To increase the focus of the current discussion on meditation and how it contributes to the process of decentering, at this time I will elaborate further on one type of meditation: mindfulness meditation.

Mindfulness meditation practice speaks directly to what the Dalai Lama (2003) delineated earlier in *The 3 Trainings*, that concentrated meditation removes subtle, internal distractions and thereby removing impediments blocking proper understanding (or the goal of attaining wisdom). Mindfulness meditation can be viewed as consisting of two sub-practices that actively work to remove these subtle, internal distractions. Wallace and Shapiro (2006) speak of these two practices in the context of mental balance: a **meditative quiescence (samatha)** that focuses on attentional balance and subsequently a **meditative insightfulness (vipassana)** that focuses on cognitive balance.

All participants talked about the first component and many practiced it in the past and/or in the present. The goal of **meditative quiescence**, is to develop a sustained and voluntary attention, focusing on particular objects without forgetfulness (laxity) and distraction (hyperactivity) (Shapiro et al., 2006; Wallace & Shapiro, 2006). Techniques that fall under this component of mindfulness meditation include mindfulness breathing where practitioners attend to the physical experience of breathing such as the rise and fall of their abdomen while inhaling and exhaling, and with even more fine-tuning, attending to the sensation of breath as it travels through one's nostrils. There is a recalibration towards attentional balance, the mind needs to be aroused to counter laxity and to be relaxed to counter agitation. Ultimately the practitioner develops simultaneous qualities of relaxation (attentional stability) and attentional vividness (Wallace and Shapiro, 2006). Interestingly and with far-reaching implications for research, training and clinical

practice, the latter finding is contrary to findings in Western psychology where attentional arousal is related to effort not relaxation (Critchley & Mathias, 2003).

For this very reason, more than half of the participants (including the practice participant) felt samatha practices were an important part of their Buddhist practice, allowing them to reap the double-benefit of meditative quiescence. Two participants, Monkey King and Dragon felt this type of practice might benefit individuals who have difficulty with relaxation and staying focused. However, they did not feel these practices played an important role or were of particular relevance to their own Buddhist practice. These two participants engaged in other types of meditation, with one being more consistently applied than the other in their practice. Both participants were also more assertive about their faith in a Western Pureland. This is a way-station that helps believers to accelerate themselves towards enlightenment. It is possible that the decreased investment in mindfulness meditation is the result of the assumption that, having a strong faith in a Western Pureland is supposed to short-circuit the time and effort it takes to reach enlightenment using mindfulness meditation. In fact, it is commonly known in Buddhism that one of the reasons lay practitioners are attracted to the concept of a Western Pureland, is that strong faith replaces the need to commit oneself to the rigors and time-consuming aspects of mindfulness meditation, a practice that is more likely to be practiced by monastics.

Mindfulness meditation usually progresses towards **meditative insightfulness (vipassana)**, and it can be seen as a step up from “meditative quiescence” (samatha). That is, attentional balance (being able to attend) is a necessary prerequisite for cognitive balance (being able to have insight) (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006). Through cognitive

balance, a person experiences the world as is “in the sense of knowing as opposed to purely discursive thought,” without projecting one’s assumptions or ideas and thereby reducing cognitive distortions (Wallace, 2005). When a practitioner arrives at this stage of practice, it becomes more apparent exactly how mindfulness meditation contributes to the process of decentering and increases the outcome experience of wisdom and compassion.

As might be expected, participants who valued the importance of samatha practices also valued the vipassana practices of mindfulness meditation. However, only one of these participants, Smart, practiced vipassana meditation on a daily basis, and was able to describe the intricacies of this practice at an experiential level. His experience of vipassana meditation is similar, if not the same to what Wallace and Shapiro (2006) describe as cognitive balance: being able to pay attention to an on-going stream of thoughts and not reacting to them. It can start off with something as simple as, not reacting to one’s physical discomfort while meditating, and gradually building towards observation of thoughts (including emotions) with an open awareness. This leads to the next point which is at the core of mindfulness meditation: the development of an intimate understanding of the Buddhist concept of impermanence, that change is guaranteed and it is an enduring aspect of daily living. Smart talked about understanding the true nature of things – the rising and passing of thoughts and emotions (reactions) from moment to moment. This intimate awareness of impermanence can help one to reduce one’s attachment to worldly experiences. Impermanence is training your mind to be internally observant and practicing to let go of whatever passes through, over and over again. In essence, a practitioner is practicing to decenter moment to moment, by experiencing

firsthand the impermanence of discrete units of phenomena such as bodily sensations, cognitions and then emotions (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006).

To immerse oneself in the experience of impermanence through meditation, eases (and speeds up) the letting-go process by reducing cravings, desires, attachments and suffering. One comes to a deep “knowing” that the truth about reality is that everything is impermanent: a cause creates an effect. As such, all conditions exist as a result of their interrelatedness and on-going flux of cause and effect impinging on one another. Think of a huge neural network that is visually messy but when reduced to individual connections, all neurons are connected to one another, one way or another. It is also nearly impossible for each of these neurons to have its own enduring identity since they are constantly being influenced by a neighboring connection to another neuron.

So how does one apply the concept of impermanence in daily, worldly experiences? Let’s use the example of anger: the very act of holding onto something (i.e. anger) which by nature is dynamic and ever-changing (i.e. the experience of anger changes through time), wanting it to be static, is a delusion and creates suffering (i.e. I think we can all agree that holding onto anger for a long time in the same way is not a healthy maneuver). If one is able to experience impermanence at such a micro-level, it makes it easier to engage in a meditative state of mind or have a cognitive balance, not just while meditating in solitude but also in different life contexts. The most challenging ones as reported by the participants occur in our relationships with others, whether in the personal realm, the workplace or other social situations. Gradually with practice, it is possible to attain attentional and cognitive balance and develop an overarching awareness of one’s self/ego, what it consists of, which is unique to each individual since our lives

unfold in different ways. The lives we live have an impact on how we become conditioned and attached to worldly phenomena. Ultimately, a practitioner comes to identify and understand how their ego is conditioned/attached, and then coming to the realization that without these conditions, the true essence of ego is emptiness (remember the individual neuron's identity). This dispels the notion of an ego that is apparently intrinsic and enduring through time. This does not mean that one must meditate in a specific way to attain this type of wisdom and reach enlightenment. However, mindfulness meditation has been described as an effective method to **“fast-track”** through to the path of liberation from suffering and the path to enlightenment (Shapiro et al., 2006).

In listening to Smart talk about his vipassana practice was fascinating and awe-inspiring, to say the least. The word sublime would be fitting to describe how I felt at the time. To further clarify, I am not referring to mystical experiences or anything that might be considered paranormal. In fact, all of the participants, irrespective of how they went about decentering themselves in their Buddhist practice, talked about the importance of being present, of putting forth effort in one's practice and not becoming attached to one's practice nor the mystical experiences themselves. After all, meditation without a higher purpose (conation) can be seen as a positive neurosis. Participants reminded themselves to simply observe these events/reactions as they arose and to not react.

It is important for me to acknowledge the difference between what I'm doing in this academic exercise that is describing the essence of decentering and the actual practice and experience of decentering in one's daily living. All participants talked about how difficult it is to let go of one's attachments (even more mind-boggling when you

think the goal is to let go of one's ego), and how crucial it is to engage in experiential learning. One *MUST* experience decentering for him/her self, to take refuge in oneself and over a prolonged period of time. This requires a great deal of dedication and hard work which involves routine and daily practice, internalizing knowledge, applying knowledge, and practicing the skills. Such process can be particularly trying for beginner practitioners. Smart, when talking about how hard this work was for him in the beginning said it best, "It's a conundrum, because on the one hand, you're practicing to let go, but you can't do this unless you allow yourself to experience your attachments at an intimate level, whether it's being attached to averting pain or grasping onto pleasure."

This is why **right volition**, developed from one's personhood and out of one's motivation for Buddhist practice, is crucial in maintaining a consistent and disciplined practice. Letting go of one's conditioned ego with objectivity can be a monumental task. Encountering barriers and obstacles seemed inevitable along the way. Thus, having the right volition served to remind these practitioners why they chose this particular path of liberation in the first place, and to motivate their continued practice of morality and meditation. Volition is also an essential ingredient that can encourage practitioners to "return" to the foundations they forged in the beginning for guidance: morality (Buddha's teachings) and the sangha.

The third and last training is **wisdom**. Recently, I attended a dinner party where a child asked adult Buddhist practitioners what this term meant in within Buddhism. One practitioner looked for the simplest way to define this very deep concept, saying "wisdom is smart." Upon hearing this, another practitioner added "it's a special kind of smart where you're kind and compassionate." I thought this was a great, simplified definition



because there is an intricate relationship between wisdom and compassion as goals and outcomes in the practice of Buddhism. Wisdom as defined by all practitioners in this study, is in line with those found in psychological literature: developing the ability to view reality as is (with limited or no projections), and being able to slowly replace one's illusory self with a "spiritual self-schema" (Avants & Margolin, 2004; Wallace & Shapiro, 2006).

Wisdom is not necessarily an actual training per se as conveyed in the term 3-fold training. It was presented by all participants as a practice goal, a desired outcome and/or an actual outcome they experienced. There is an obvious evolution of viewing wisdom as a goal to experiencing it as an actual outcome. As an outcome the development of wisdom is not simply a linear process within the context of Buddhist 3-fold training. The process of decentering does not end when a person experiences wisdom as an outcome. There is a synergistic relationship between the three trainings of morality, meditation and wisdom. For practitioners the process of developing wisdom can serve to reinforce their devotion, and deepen their continual understanding and practice of morality and meditation.

Wisdom as an outcome was more discernible in the traditional sense when described by more advanced practitioners, such as Sun and Smart. They were also more consistent in their discipline and commitment to a structured Buddhist practice over time (i.e. predictable and integrated practice). Sun and Smart had a greater capacity to perceive the world in a focused, non-reactive and objective manner. They did not, at any time, convey to me that they experienced more wisdom; it was that I was able to glean from the participants' stories, a difference in how they worked towards achieving and

experiencing wisdom. Also, there was an ever-present, natural mindfulness of being non-attached to positive outcomes in their practice. Experiencing positive outcomes in their Buddhist practice merely helped them to acknowledge their progress, which then served to further motivate them within their practice. Sun and Smart were not attached to these self-assessments. Being present and non-attached allowed these participants to immerse themselves in the joyful experience of Buddhist practice, rather than being preoccupied with the positive outcomes of their practice.

Wisdom was invariably accompanied by the goal/outcome of compassion. Although compassion is not explicitly stated in Buddhist 3-fold training, it is very much a part of it. All participants stressed the importance of developing compassion through the practice of morality, meditation and wisdom. If there is an end goal, it is that the trainings reinforce the continual development of compassion towards self and others. This was clearly illustrated by Dragon who believed that his moral growth/development was intricately connected to his ability to be compassionate towards others. For him, thinking back to his childhood and adolescence, there was an on-going movement from self-interest to protect himself (to deny blame) to being grateful to others (for calling him out on his misdeeds). He was able to see that it was through other people's compassionate acts that he was given opportunities to address his moral mistakes. This self-awareness and deeper understanding of compassion made it easier for him to empathize with others in similar situations.

The deepest awareness he shared with me was that it was not always easy to be compassionate. The people who alerted Dragon to his misdeeds in the past were not necessarily compassionate because they gave him a free pass. Rather, they were

compassionate because they chose to share their concerns with him and still punished him with the appropriate consequences. He believed that at the time this was not the easiest route for these individuals to take, but the better one to take in the long run. Gaining insight/wisdom such as this can help one to develop a keen awareness of how others are kind in small and simple, but yet transformative ways. This “potential to do good” can be modeled in our relationships with ourselves and others. By understanding Dragon’s relationship with wisdom and compassion, it was a window to gauging how he had changed internally (and radically through time), how he had been involved in the process of decentering.

#### Mechanisms of Change: Changing from the Inside Out

Avants and Margolin (2004) created 3S Therapy to treat clients with addictions. An emphasis in treatment was to help these clients gradually develop a **spiritual self-schema** to replace their habitually-activated, addict self-schema. This concept can also be aptly applied to the participants of the current study. Although the participants in this study are not clients, they described their own process of learning how to let go of their habitual selves in order to pursue the path of liberation and enlightenment. In fact, Smart talked about retraining his “sick mind.” Self-schemas and their contents, thus far in this study, have been referred to as one’s self or ego. The assumption is that through one’s self-schema, one is anchored to understand and interact with one’s world. The participants’ self-schemas were very much grounded in their life experiences. In their stories, I could clearly hear how their backgrounds, mainly their formative life experiences, were linked to their current struggles and/or successes. Poignant life experiences, those that made participants’ more aware of suffering in their own lives,

were of particular import. These experiences lead some participants to experience catharsis and actively pursue Buddhist practice. This process seem aligned with the most basic Buddhist principles, the Four Noble Truths, encourages one to tackle the issue of suffering in life head-on. It seems as if these poignant life experiences shook some of these participants to their core and helped them to realize that their old way of living was not necessarily the most efficient method to live their lives right now. My sense is that in arriving at this new awareness and taking the initiative to choose new frameworks for living life, involves a certain amount of resourcefulness and resilience as part of their personality make-up.

Motivation, part of the aforementioned mindfulness component of conation, again plays an important role, not only in the essential composition of mindfulness, but also as a driving force/mechanism that kick-starts the process of decentering. Poignant life experiences sometimes have the power to create enough of a ego-dystonic differential, that a catharsis ensues. This can motivate one to seriously question their current perception of reality and the effectiveness of their current worldview. It comes down to the simple desire that, if given a choice, most individuals would rather not suffer tremendously (or at all) in their lifetimes. If this choice is available, it can motivate one to commit to this other way of viewing reality and living life. Self-discrepancy theory states that individuals will work to reduce discrepancies between their current and desired goals (Higgins, Bond, Klein, & Strauman, 1986). In this case, many of the participants already had some form of prior exposure to Buddhist knowledge and experiences, so the transition to use Buddhist resources, to navigate through life and to reduce their self-perceived experience of discrepant goals, were not so unusual.

The development of a spiritual self-schema serves to help one gradually understand the **content of their habitual self-schema**. In Avants and Margolin's study (2004) involving addict participants, it was anything related to their addiction whereas with this study it was anything habitual in the participants' lives. Initially my focus was a somewhat unclear as I attempted to explore each participant's life more fully in the beginning and to understand what was important to each of them. Eventually insight was achieved and my focus sharpened when I started exploring each participant's own area of conflicts/struggles. Despite these individual areas of conflict, a pattern of thinking emerged: more dualistic, absolutist and outcome-oriented before they consciously applied themselves to Buddhist practice in their adulthood. After taking on Buddhist practice, a different pattern of thinking emerged: a more nuanced, calmer, reflective, and contemplative tone. Participants took more time to reflect and not react, especially difficult social situations. There was a feeling of equanimity, of acceptance (rather than change), of process-orientation, and more of a flow, of being. A belief evolved suggesting that in time solutions would present themselves and consequently participants were less likely to take an action-oriented approach toward seeking solutions, or try to do something and force things to happen. This style of being relates to what The Dalai Lama (2003) said can occur when engaging in Buddhist 3-fold training: it teaches a person to be tolerant (of the unknown and the unpleasant) and patient (especially towards enemies); it facilitates a change process which helps one to develop compassion.

In previous sections, a more external, psychosocial manifestations for the process of decentering was presented. In this section, I present a more, behind-the-scenes, micro approach to what decentering looks like. From the data emerged a picture of how a

significant change occurred in the way participants related to and worked with their thoughts/emotions brought on by stimuli. In Buddhism, this change mechanism is called wisdom, whereas in psychology, it is called metacognition. **Metacognition** was introduced by Flavell (1979) in the field of developmental psychology. It is considered a naturally-occurring process in normal human development. The assumption is that as we age we also have an increased intellectual capacity to see phenomena “as is” or in an objective light.

The inclusion of Buddhist mindfulness practice to this naturally-occurring capacity of perceiving the world (i.e., wisdom) accelerates the process of decentering. Purdon and Wells (1999) define metacognition as “ the aspect of the information processing system that monitors, interprets, evaluates and regulates, the contents and processes of its own organization” (p. 71). Teasdale (1999) talks about metacognitive insight to explain the experience, objective perceiving of reality: “sometimes thoughts are just thoughts and not a reflection of reality.” Shapiro et al. (2006) refer to the term re-perceiving as a “shift in perspective” where “one is able to disidentify from the contents of their consciousness and view their moment-to-moment experience with greater clarity and objectivity.” (p.5). Dragon actually used the phrase “shift in perspective” when describing his experience of decentering.

It is one thing to change one’s thought content but another to **change one’s relationship to their thought content**. This idea represents a radical and revolutionary experience. The clearest example of participants grappling with this concept was in their understanding of suffering. They each turned to Buddhist practice in a more deliberate way because they desired to end suffering in their lives. They learned that you could not

eradicate suffering in life, but you can change the way you experience it through an approach of acceptance and contemplation. And if one practices Buddhist concepts of emptiness, dependent origination and impermanence in their daily living, it is possible to understand that **suffering is a subjectively experienced mental imbalance.**

In many ways, we create our own happiness and/or our own hell. In closing, I offer a story which I believe exemplifies the experience of decentering. Growing up, I felt ballerinas were some of the most graceful creatures on earth. A perception shared with a legion of other young girls, I'm sure. When I arrived in Canada during my adolescence, I had an increased opportunity to be exposed to the art of ballet (ballet wasn't a big deal when I lived in Costa Rica). In Canada, Karen Kain was the principal ballerina of all principal ballerinas. I was always drawn to her beautiful performances as an outside observer. It was only when I heard her talk about the evolution of her relationship with ballet, that I gained a better sense of how she personally approached her art. She talked of how when she first became a ballerina, even up to the point when she became famous, she worked hard and practiced hard. She focused on perfecting her technique. However, it was not until much later, when she became more confident about her art form, that she was able to organically connect with the artistic process of her profession. After a lifetime, she no longer focused only on the outcomes. She focused on flowing with her creativity wherever it took her, and there was a deep joy that sprang out of this experience. It appeared she had gone through a switch in her metacognitive process. She changed the way she related to ballet as an art form rather than doing something to change ballet.

New Findings from Current Study

The significant findings of this study is a result of using a phenomenological approach to study the process of decentering for Buddhist practitioners. Before this project, most literature I read in the field of psychology was conceptual or outcome-focused. The most common outcome characterized in the literature emphasized whether different meditation practices were beneficial or not to practitioners. The Buddhist literature helped me to understand that there was a phenomenon such as “decentering.” However, it was not until I started conversing with study participants that I began to clue in to the many textures and depths of this phenomenon. The phenomenological method allowed me to listen to their stories in surround-sound. There were particular areas of emphasis, and yet, I had the opportunity to listen to these areas through a holistic process that unfolded through 3 separate interviews per participant.

Most surprisingly, for me was the extent to which the essence of conation was emphasized as one decenterers. Insert definition of conation here I, definitely, never thought I'd be parsing out the different aspects of conation (motivation for change, intention-goals and volition-attitudes) from these shared stories. The concept of conation is not commonly-discussed in the field of Buddhist and mindfulness psychologies. Authors do talk about conation, those who talk about it in a fully emergent way, as a discrete variable, are far and few in between. In strong agreement with Wallace and Shapiro (2006), I believe that conation is an essential component of mindfulness practice, more so than morality and meditation practices. This study illustrates how conation plays a key role in driving forth (activating) the mechanism of metacognition in the process of decentering.



In addition, as I now understand the importance of conation more fully, I realized that conation may be a very fruitful and rich area (or entry) of research, from which to concretely integrate Western and Eastern psychologies. Take motivation for change or readiness for change, this is a common human experience and can jumpstart all kinds of behaviors. For the participants in this study, understanding their motivation was crucial in understanding their individual approach to Buddhist practice and subsequent experience of decentering. All participants adhered to the same basic tenets of Buddhist teachings (i.e. the Four Noble Truths). And yet because of the way they were motivated, how they set their goals and intentions, there was a difference in quality to how they each experienced the process of decentering.

Beyond conation, the phenomenological approach helped me to understand other important aspects of decentering through Buddhist practice. I had the opportunity to learn about how moral training evolves through time, and also the different manifestations of meditative practices for different participants. As a result of this opportunity to engage in a deep understanding of the participants' experience with Buddhist practice, I came to understand the concept of wisdom/metacognition beyond a purely intellectual sense. Again, because of the stories I heard, I am strongly persuaded to agree that it would be more efficacious to adopt a new therapeutic direction (especially in CBT) of changing one's relationship with thoughts rather than changing one's thought content.

### Limitations

As much as this exploration focused on understanding the essences in the process of decentering, the results are not generalizable. I learned about decentering from a

specific group of participants, first generation Asian Americans from a particular Buddhist sect. Also, most participants, except for two, were not advanced Buddhist practitioners. This was helpful in the sense that I really had the opportunity to explore conation-related issues. However, the nature of this phenomenological inquiry limited my opportunity to explore the mindful living practices of morality and meditation, especially meditation. There was only one nun in the current study. Insert sentence about such implications, relative to gender here. An inclusion of more advanced practitioners, such as Buddhist monastics, might have created a richer discussion in this area and shed more light on the mechanism of metacognition. It would have been enriching to cross-relate stories between moderate level and advanced practitioners. Overall, my intent was to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of decentering through Buddhist practice, recognizing the limit generalizability of such findings beyond the selected sample. Nonetheless, this study offer potential for investigating certain identified discrete variables in quantitative studies. However, at the end of the day, this study reflects a qualitative endeavor and I believe it's important to accept the spirit that imbues this form of inquiry.

### Future Directions

It is my hope that more studies will be conducted to explore the process of decentering using qualitative methodologies. Qualitative studies with differing perspectives can offer more comprehensive formulations of how individuals experience and seek mental well-being. Indeed, qualitative methodologies afford emphasis on understanding the experience of mental well-being from a process perspective. My sense is that through such studies, we can arrive at a deeper understanding of the underlying

mechanisms influencing our behaviors and lifestyles. My belief is that if we establish a solid, basic foundational knowledge in understanding the process of decentering, then we may identify potential valid, emergent and discrete variables for further analysis through quantitative methods. This is the strength of qualitative methods; they allow us to explore human phenomena in all its fullness and complexity. Within future qualitative inquiries I would encourage researchers to sample different kinds of Buddhist practitioners. I would also encourage investigations of this phenomenon using interdisciplinary perspectives. The current study was conducted from a psychological perspective for the most part. It would be enriching to have different disciplines and associated theories (i.e. sociological, critical race theory, etc) guide explorations of this phenomenon and see what kinds of interesting data emerges.

#### Implications

The participants in this study talked extensively about how they maintained their mental well-being in the past and present. Yet ironically, as a researcher I did not feel that we were talking about mental well-being, emotions, psychological health, etc., per say. To illustrate, I rarely recall anyone using the words “mental health” at any time. Neither did I feel that we were talking about mental health in a professionalized sense. This is probably because I was exploring the process of decentering with a group of non-clinical participants who were also first-generation Asian Americans. During the interviews, the participants were relaxed especially after the first 30 minutes of the first interview. They talked as if they were simply having a mundane conversation with me. All participants easily shared information that was very personal, at one point or another.

This makes me wonder if there are implications from this for how the profession of psychology can reduce general stigma towards mental health and mental health services.

This is particularly relevant for first-generation Asian immigrants, who might not feel compelled to seek out professional psychological services for their mental health problems. I recently had the opportunity to work with an Asian-American mother whose adult-aged son, a second generation Asian-American, presented with a severe mental illness. The mother was worried that her son was becoming increasingly symptomatic and decompensating at a rapid pace. I explored different ways she could assist her son in getting treatment, but let her know that most options would require her son to voluntarily seek out services on his own, given the issue of client rights. The one option she could use was applying for a Mental Health Warrant. She did not outwardly express her disapproval of this option, but it was clear she was not open to it, as she continued to ask a number of different professionals to see her son without his consent. This was after it had been explained to her numerous times that a Mental Health Warrant was not a criminal procedure, but rather a legal procedure to help her son get treatment. It is also possible that there might have been a language barrier, preventing her from understanding the difference between criminal versus legal procedures intended to assist individuals with mental health problems.

As you can see from this case, there was a clash between following the rule of law as prescribed by mental health professionals versus, a less formal approach to resolve this dilemma as desired by the mother. How, then, do we assist such individuals and their families who need assistance and yet are wary of formalized ways of seeking mental health services in their new host country? I am speaking in particular of those individuals

who come from native lands where the focus of change is through the family unit, common in collectivist societies, and not the legal system, more common in individualistic societies. Also, if an Asian-American is a serious Buddhist practitioner, is there anything about this background that makes it easier to talk about mental health issues in a non-stigmatizing way? Let's take it one step further, how can this non-threatening way of talking about mental health-related issues be generalized to other groups of individuals, whether it be another Asian-American or someone from any sociocultural group for that matter? There are more questions than answers, and yet this is a worthwhile topic of exploration. I am reminded by how rational every participant seemed when they talked about their own experience of decentering. Yes, they all had emotional and dramatic moments in their lives, but my sense is that the tools readily available to them through their Buddhist practice, helped each of them to normalize the chaos in their lives, to make sense of it and to have the confidence to tackle their experienced challenges and barriers in a rational manner.

More close to home, is the implication related to how counseling psychologists are trained to detect the effectiveness of non-Westernized ways of mental health treatment. That is, how keen is our sensitivity to other frameworks of healing as a profession and as professionals? I knew prior to reading professional journals and my textbooks during academic training that Asian American immigrants sometimes turn to their religious organizations as a way of coping in their new host countries. However, I wonder how much easier it would have been for me to dismiss this entire Buddhist framework of healing, had I not immersed myself in it opposed to simply reading about it. My intention would have been to memorize the facts for my test or to incorporate

facts into my written assignments. During the academic training process I did not anticipate having deep and cathartic learning experiences. As of now, as a result of this qualitative research endeavor I find it impossible to dismiss this framework of being culturally immersed within a community or population. Through in-depth discussions I was able to observe the participants in their natural settings of practice for an extended period of time. Being there allowed me to viscerally feel the power of their unique healing process, even if I decide to never use it for myself. Nonetheless, I know it really works for some people. As mentioned earlier being present with participants and experiencing their healing process was an awe-inspiring, surround-sound experience for me. As a researcher my experience in this endeavor made my book readings come alive. My question now is, how can counseling psychology as a profession train future psychologists in a way that truly increases their multicultural competence, given that much of our training is done through didactic and practical teachings in rather controlled environments. Is it possible to learn about other cultures, other ways of being through a more cathartic and visceral level of learning during one's graduate studies?

In recognizing that Asian American immigrants sometimes turn to their religious affiliations for comfort, I have a certain emotional understanding of this as I have firsthand observations and experiences. Yet, despite having such prior exposure as a guide as a researcher, I still underwent a major learning curve. As a counseling psychology professional, I find emotional learning to be a fundamentally essential part of my professional development. I went to a masters-level program that emphasized self-awareness about my own social groups of reference. That was a fundamentally important learning experience. However, with the current endeavor I felt I had the opportunity to

not only learn about myself, but also to immerse myself in the experiences of others. This reflects a central tenet, “self-in-relationship-to-others,” as defined in the theory of multicultural counseling (Sue, Ivey, & Pedersen, 1996). Indeed, the process of developing multicultural competence was far more significant and meaningful beyond a sterile textbook I encountered during professional academic training. This perspective reflects my bias towards qualitative studies when studying human phenomenon. My experience is that qualitative research has the potential to enrich researchers’ experience of the world and cultures around them. My hope is that, at least in the field of counseling psychology, efforts to increase or enhance multicultural competence will be partially pursued through in-depth investigations of mental health-related phenomena using qualitative research methodologies.

## Appendix 1

### *Sources Of Data*

(Designed for 1 Practice interviewee, 1 Pilot interviewee, and 5 Study interviewees)

Source of Data	Phases of Study and Their Expected Sources of Data						
	Initial Bracketing	Subsequent Bracketing	Informed Consent & Interview Set-Up	Data Collection Interviews	Recording	Data Analysis	Verification
1. Self-Reflection (Researcher as instrument)	Yes					Yes	Yes
2. Self-Reflection (Assumptions & biases)	Yes					Yes	Yes
3. Informed Consent (6X)*			Yes				
4. Personal Background Info Sheet (7X)			Yes				
5. Interview Schedule (7X)			Yes				
6. Practice and Pilot Study Interview Protocols (6X)				Yes			
7. Final Interview Protocols (3X)				Yes			
8. Practice and Pilot Study Audio Files (6X)				Yes	Yes		
9. Interview Audio Files (15X)				Yes	Yes		
10. Spontaneous Reactions (21X)		Yes		Yes		Yes	Yes
11. Transcriptions – Hard Copy (21X)				Yes	Yes		
12. Transcriptions – E – File (21X)				Yes	Yes		
13. Notes from Feedback Session with interviewees (6X)		Yes				Yes	Yes

\* The participant from the Practice Study consented to participate in the practice run of the Interview Protocols. This occurred before MU IRB approved this study, and therefore it was not necessary to obtain an Informed Consent for the participant from the Practice Study.



Appendix 2

*Recruitment Script*

Hi (participant),

My name is July Liang. I'm calling because your name has been referred to me by Yi Hung Fa Shi to help me with my dissertation work. I will be studying the process of decentering, so what it means to let go of worldly experiences, for racial minority Buddhist practitioners. Yi Hung Fa Shi recommended you to participate in my study because of your English language proficiency, your experience with the Buddhist practice of decentering and your formal induction into the teachings of Master Hsin Yun.

I'm interested in studying the process of decentering because I want to help increase interest in the inner experiences of Buddhist practitioners, especially racial minority practitioners. I would like to invite you to meet with me so I can explain to you my study in greater detail. Briefly, I will be asking participants to meet with me for three 90-minute interviews and two short feedback sessions. We can meet at the Temple or at your house, a quiet place where we can have a conversation without being interrupted. I will be compensating participants \$15 for every face-to-face contact hour. Or, you also have the option of donating this money to the Temple instead.

Would you be interested in meeting with me sometime soon so I can talk with you about my study?

Thank you for your time.

Appendix 3

*Informed Consent*

You are being invited to participate in a qualitative research study exploring the process of decentering (letting go of the ego) for Buddhist practitioners. I Hong Fa Shi, the Abbess at Hsiang Yun Temple, suggested that you would be a good candidate to participate in this study. Prior to participation, it is important that you read this form and understand its content.

Your participation is voluntary. This means that at any time while this research is being conducted, you are free to decide that you do not wish to participate or to withdraw from the study. The principal investigator will keep all data that has been obtained and compensated before the withdrawal date.

As a participant, you will be asked to spend a maximum of 6 hours throughout a period of four months as the study progresses. The principal investigator will ask you to complete a brief Personal Background Information Sheet (PBIS) with your contact information (to be used only for the purpose of this study) and your new codename, which will be used on all subsequent sources of data. You will also be asked to complete a mutually agreed upon interview schedule. The principal investigator will then provide you with an interview question to help you prepare for the first interview on your experience with decentering. Data collection will be conducted by the principal investigator. There will be a total of three audiotaped interviews, each lasting no more than 90 minutes and they will all be scheduled within a period of two to three weeks. In about 2 months after all interviewing is completed, the principal investigator will schedule two feedback sessions with you to discuss how the interview data has been analyzed. Each feedback session will last between 15 minutes to 30 minutes and may be conducted on the phone. Your contribution in the feedback sessions is important to the integrity and validity of the final results produced in this study. At the end of each face-to-face session that you participate in, you will be compensated with cash at a rate of \$15 per hour. Alternately, you can choose to donate the earnings from your participation in this study to your affiliated temple. The researcher will donate the total amount to your temple within a week when all face-to-face participation has been completed.

You are encouraged to ask any questions throughout your participation in this study. The principal investigator will be happy to share your personal results and the aggregated results at the end of this study. All of the sources of data (except this consent form and the PBIS) gathered from you will be stored under a codename. Physical data will be stored in a locked cabinet and electronic data will be stored in a laptop requiring username and password for access. When the data is shared, the data will only contain your codename, and it will only be shared with individuals pertinent to the completion of this study. Aside from the principal investigator, they include dissertation committee members, and two peer reviewers.

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this study. Should any questions or concerns arise, you are encouraged to speak to the principal investigator at any time throughout the study either in person or by contacting her. The contact information for the Institutional Review Board Office at the University of Missouri-Columbia is also provided on this form for you to use at your convenience.

The expected benefits of this study are increased knowledge about the experience of decentering for Buddhist practitioners, a more comprehensive understanding of your own decentering process, and potential publication of this study's results. You will be informed about the possibility of publication and if a manuscript for this study is submitted, a general thank you note will be included to acknowledge your participation.

Please sign this consent form with full knowledge to the nature and purpose of the procedures. A copy of this informed consent form will be given to you to keep.

---

Signature of Participant

---

Date

Juily Jung Chuang Liang, M.A., Principal Investigator, University of Missouri-Columbia  
(210) 240-4071, [jjlfce@mizzou.edu](mailto:jjlfce@mizzou.edu)

Institutional Review Board Office, University of Missouri-Columbia  
(573) 882-9585

Appendix 4

*Personal Background Information Sheet*

Date:	
Interviewee's Name:	
Contact Information	
Phone # (H):	Phone # (W):
Email Address:	
Interviewee's Codename:	
Gender:	
Date of Birth:	
Country of Birth:	
# of Years Residing in an English-Speaking Country:	
# of Years Residing in the United States:	
# of Years Interviewee Has Spoken in English:	
Highest Level of Education Achieved:	
Area of Specialization:	
# of Years Where Education Received Was Taught in English:	
Highest Level of Education Achieved in English:	
Area of Specialization:	
Date Interviewee Began Formal Practice of Buddhism:	
Present Level of Formal Training in Buddhist Practice:	

Appendix 5

*Interview Schedule*

Participant Codename:

<i>Session</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Start Time</i>	<i>End Time</i>	<i>Place</i>
<i>Interview 1</i>				
<i>Interview 2</i>				
<i>Interview 3</i>				
<i>Feedback Session</i>				

Appendix 6

*Interview 1 Protocol: Focused Personal History*

(Encourage interviewee to use the washroom before beginning)  
(Begin Taping)  
(Remind interviewee to speak in English only during interview)

Project: The process of Buddhist decentering: A phenomenological study of racial minority American Buddhists from the Fo Guan Shan Temple Buddhist Order

(Briefly describe the project)

Start Time of Interview: Interviewer: Juily Jung Chuang Liang  
End Time of Interview: Interviewee Codename:  
Date:  
Place:

(Encourage interviewee to focus on personal experiences of decentering)

***Question:***

I'm interested in knowing what attracted you to become a Buddhist practitioner.

***Tips:***

- To help the participant understand what you mean by decentering, **briefly mention ending suffering by letting go of attachments or ingrained habits or ways of being**. Mention the Four Noble Truths only when necessary.
- Focus on **PAST MEANINGFUL** life events (including but not limited to ceremony of induction – taking refuge in the Triple Gem), persons, relationships, and personal experiences that contributed to interviewee's interest in Buddhist practice.
- Encourage them to talk about what these memories meant to them at the time (**NOT NOW**).
- Have interviewees describe their memories **FULLY**.
- Focus on how participants handled their **emotions and what they were like in relationships**.
- **Sample questions** to help with the flow of the interview include
  - How did you learn about Buddhism?
  - What did you learn about Buddhism, what was it about, what did it mean to you at the time?
  - How did you practice Buddhism?
  - How did you used to experience your emotions?
  - What were you like around people?

(Thank interviewee for participating and reassure them about maintaining confidentiality of their data. Confirm schedule for the 2<sup>nd</sup> interview.)

Appendix 7

*Interview 2 Protocol: Details Of Present Experience*

(Encourage interviewee to use the washroom before beginning)

(Begin Taping)

(Remind interviewee to speak in English only during interview)

Project: The process of Buddhist decentering: A phenomenological study of racial minority American Buddhists from the Fo Guan Shan Temple Buddhist Order

(Briefly describe the project)

Start Time of Interview:

Interviewer: Juily Jung Chuang Liang

End Time of Interview:

Interviewee Codename:

Date:

Place:

(Encourage interviewee to focus on personal experiences of decentering)

***Question:***

Last time, you helped me to understand how you became a Buddhist practitioner and how you experienced letting go of your worldly experiences in the past. Today, I would like for you to talk about your present experiences with the process of letting go. What do you do to practice letting go of your attachments?

***Tips:***

- Focus on **PRESENT, MEANINGFUL** life events, activities, persons, relationships, and personal experiences that contribute to interviewee's continued practice of Buddhist decentering.
- To illustrate, the interviewee can talk in **DETAIL** about their on-going daily Buddhist practice.
- Have interviewees **DESCRIBE** their **PRESENT** experiences **FULLY** and **FACTUALLY** (no opinions).
- Focus on how participants are currently handling their **emotions and what they are like in relationships**.

- **Sample questions** to help with the flow of the interview include
  - What is it about you as a person that attracts you to Buddhist or makes you more open to Buddhist practice?
  - What is it about Buddhist practice that attracts you?
  - What role does Buddhist play in your overall identity as a person?
  - How do you understand your Buddhist practice, what makes you want to practice it?
  - What kinds of expectations do you have in your Buddhist practice, how do they help and/or not help with your practice?
  - How do you feel about your practice right now?
  - How do you practice Buddhist? What are your practice preferences?
  - Tell me how you define meditation and what goes on when you meditate?
  - What do you experience internally when you decenter or let go of your attachments?
  - What are some difficulties that arise in your Buddhist practice, how do you work through them?
  - What are some attachments you currently have a hard time letting go, how are you working through them?
  - How do you experience your emotions now?
  - How do you currently handle your emotions?
  - What kinds of relationships do you have?
  - What are you like in relationships?
  - How does your Buddhist practice help you with your emotions and relationships?

(Thank interviewee for participating and reassure them about maintaining confidentiality of their data. Confirm schedule for the 3<sup>rd</sup> interview.)



Appendix 8

*Interview 3 Protocol: Reflections On Meaning*

(Encourage interviewee to use the washroom before beginning)  
(Begin Taping)  
(Remind interviewee to speak in English only during interview)

Project: The process of Buddhist decentering: A phenomenological study of racial minority American Buddhists from the Fo Guan Shan Temple Buddhist Order

(Briefly describe the project)

Start Time of Interview: Interviewer: Juily Jung Chuang Liang  
End Time of Interview: Interviewee Codename:  
Date:  
Place:

(Encourage interviewee to focus on personal experiences of decentering)

Interview Protocol continued on the next page.

***Question:***

You've shared with me many past and present experiences about letting go of your worldly attachments through Buddhist practice. Given these experiences, how do you make sense of how you as a person and your relationships have changed from past to present? Also, what do you see for yourself in your future Buddhist practice as you continue to learn to become less attached?

***Tips:***

- Have interviewees describe their **REFLECTIONS FULLY** and in an **OVERARCHING** manner. **DO NOT ASSUME** to understand what the interviewee is saying.
- Focus on meaningful life events, persons, relationships, and personal experiences that contribute to interviewee's interest in the formal practice of Buddhist decentering.
- However, encourage interviewee to **CONNECT** between past and present meanings of experiences. Encourage them to talk about what their past and present memories **MEAN** to them **NOW** and if possible, what they may mean in the **FUTURE**.

- **Sample questions** to help with the flow of the interview include
  - Define your faith, gods (if there are any), and belief system.
  - At what point did you take more of an initiative to learn about Buddhism, what happened, what did you learn?
  - What made you decide to formalize your practice, how does that help or not help with your daily practice
  - How have you changed and/or not changed in the way you approach your Buddhist practice?
  - How does your meditation help you to let go of your attachments, what kind of transformation has your meditation practice gone through
  - How do you know you've made progress in your Buddhist practice?
  - What has your growth experience been like?
  - What would you change about your past Buddhist practice?
  - How would you prefer to practice Buddhism in the future?
  - What are your short term and long term goals for Buddhist practice, how comfortable are you with these goals?
  - What would you look like once you reached enlightenment?
  
- For these sample questions, focus on **emotional regulation and relationships**.
  - To probe for emotions, ask “what meaning/significance do you see in your behaviors?”
  - What were some turning points for you in your Buddhist practice?
  - What are some major struggles you've experienced over the years in your Buddhist practice and what kind of effect did they have on your practice?
  - What were some attachments you had difficulty letting go and how did you learn to let them go?
  - What helped you work through your forks in the road, options, doubts, struggles and moments of difficulty?
  - What motivated you to continue pursuing the path of Buddhist practice?
  - What changes do you see in the way you experience your emotions over the years?
  - How do you see yourself handling emotions in the future?
  - How have people who have known you for a long time perceive you, now and then (external changes)?
  - How have your relationships changed?
  - What kinds of relationships help you with your Buddhist practice of letting go?
  - How have you come to understand the meaning of your Buddhist practice over the years?
  - How has your Buddhist practice changed you over the years, first for yourself (internal changes - your value system, identity, emotional regulation) and also in the way you interact with others?
  
- Follow-up on any questions you have and clarifications you need from Interviews 1 and 2.

(Thank interviewee for participating and reassure them about maintaining confidentiality of their data. Remind them that they will be scheduled for two more feedback sessions in about a month's time.)

Appendix 9

*Protocol for Feedback Session*

(Remind interviewee to speak in English only during interview)

Project: The process of Buddhist decentering: A phenomenological study of racial minority American Buddhists from the Fo Guan Shan Temple Buddhist Order

Start Time of Session: Interviewer: July Jung Chuang Liang  
End Time of Session: Interviewee Codename:  
Date:  
Place:

(Encourage interviewee to focus on personal experiences of decentering)

Feedback Session will be conducted after all data analyses are completed. It is expected to last anywhere from 60 minutes to 90 minutes. The discussion can be conducted on the phone or in-person. This session will give interviewer an opportunity to discuss with interviewee results from all steps of analysis, to conduct a member check so as to maintain credibility (internal validity) of analyzed results.

The specific themes or meaning units derived from the non-repetitive and non-overlapping significant statements, and the textural and structural descriptions derived from specific themes will not be known until the interview data is collected and analyzed.

Once the results are available, the interviewer will share all significant statements, themes, textural descriptions and structural descriptions with interviewee.

The main questions that will be asked repeatedly are

“How do you feel this theme captures what you were communicating to me through your significant statements?”

“Why or Why not?”

“If a theme does not make sense, what other themes can you think of to fit a significant statement(s) or which other existing theme might it (they) fit under better?”

“How do you feel the textural and structural descriptions capture the themes or meaning units?”

“Why or why not?”

“If a description does not make sense, how might the description be modified to better fit the descriptions?”

(Thank interviewee for participating and reassure them that confidentiality will be maintained.)

Appendix 10

*Excerpt Of Transcribed Raw Data for Smart*

1. Sociocultural Background

*“Well when you say environment (was it in the city)? It was a city, of population of maybe 100,000 so it was medium-sized, and it was a city, a northern city of Malaysia. I would say it was a very stable, very enjoyable childhood life.”*

2. Family Influence

*“Growing up we were comfortable, we never really had to worry about food or shelter. It was good that way and the family members had stable jobs so we don't have to worry about that, but we were never rich... so we're comfortable, and also because of the extended family many people would chip in (moneywise). For example, a very important moment in my life when they decided to help me come to the US for my studies. It was a tremendous amount of money to come here, but many family members helped out. I remember my aunts and uncles, they actually put together one lump sum of money for my studies so that's something I'm very grateful for and it also made me understand the importance of helping out each other...so trying to give unconditional love doing things without expecting something in return... so I think of incidents... that one left a very deep impression on me. You actually have to sacrifice to have the financial means for this experience.”*

3. Family of Origin's Religious Practice

*“I always liked going to the temple and I remember vividly the main Buddha hall even though in Malaysia it's always very hot humid and hot. I always remember vividly, I still can't explain why but the main buddha hall is always very cooling and soothing for some reason. Maybe both the temperature and maybe the feeling you get from the inside and I always get the sense, that when I go in there, that I'm self-cleansed or something. I feel more relaxed, more serene after that so I always liked going there, and so I still can't explain why is this cooler sense...kinda like this temple too. That's probably one of my first experiences of the environment the ambience, and getting in touch with the temples. We already covered my interactions with the monastic members, and the second one, that was also very important, the feeling that I get everytime that I go to the temple, the environment very beneficial.”*

4. (Participant's) Personhood

*“The conversations I had...I was very close to one of my aunts, and I would tell her the situations I was in. For example, I wasn't getting the results, I wasn't getting anywhere. Also having the doubt perhaps I won't be able to make it. The emphasis was always try your best, you can't control the results you can only control your own effort, but you have to make sure you put in your full effort and then leave the rest to whatever unknown forces. In Buddhism, you talk about cause and condition for something to*

*happen there needs to be cause and condition, put in the effort, part of the cause and condition, whether you get the result or not, that's not just your own effort. It depends on the situation that you're in because I've known some of my classmates. For example, one of them, she was working on a project, and later on there was some issue with the equipment that she was using. It turned out she couldn't finish because she was way too deep into the experiment. The problem surfaced too late. Those are things that one can't really control and that's part of the challenge of doing experiments. You found a fatal flaw in the experiment, had to recover. So in grad school for the first time you discover you are not in control. You put in your effort but you're not in control (that's a big lesson) that's a big lesson. I'm not sure if you agree if you work hard you are fairly in control about studies. You do your job, work hard you have more control. So grad school, that's sometimes not the case. So during that period of time, that was a growing phase for me. Spiritual side the meditation and chanting, there wasn't much going on. It was more like the mundane stuff, how to face the situation, how to resolve it, and also I mentioned finding support from family and friends, a few good friends during grad school because we went through the same process, and we understood each other and consoled each other. So those are the times you find out some people care tremendously, also provide a lot of support when you look back, you say I should also give my support as well.”*

#### 5. Poignant Life Experiences

*“Graduate school was different and challenging. The professors had different expectations. Unlike undergrad, you had to think independently and contribute new and significant knowledge. There was a period of adjustment. Life was consumed by studies. It was a good opportunity to learn about problem-solving skills on my own that can be applied to any challenging situation, worldly, mundane, spiritual. How do you keep your cool and find a good way to work through ambiguous situations. The daily chanting and family support helped.”*

#### 6. Process of Buddhist Practice

*“I had a very happy and fulfilling childhood. I could say so because I could from my peers from my friends their backgrounds. It's not because I want to compare to others. Sometimes I think I'm very fortunate to be in that situation, but as one grows up you feel that the things that I want to happen is never ending... so I remember, let's use examples because I know you like ex, I have not finished answering your question when I was in grad school. The only thing that I wanted was to graduate I wanted to graduate I wanted to get out of there because I couldn't take it anymore... so sometimes I spoke about the phase I go through, the irritation frustration depression... so sometimes I found myself in the negative mode frequently and I was able to come out mainly because of chanting and the family support. Then I started to realize that after I graduate that wasn't the end of the story. You have new goals, expectations. It never ends, when does it ever end... so I started to realize my happiness, it cannot be satisfied by fulfilling my expectations. It's a bottomless pit. I'll never be happy that way because I'll want something more and that wanting that desire, that craving is the cause of suffering...”*

*used to be I knew about it because it was in the books, in the teachings, but it was an abstract thing, but after meditation, after coming to the temple doing volunteer work, allows me to experience it more and more. There is another form of happiness that is not based on one's expectations because when you're doing volunteer work most of the time you don't think, "Oh, I'm doing this because for myself. I need this." There's no end goal. I focus on the present, what's needed to be done. You just do it single-mindedly and that's it."*

#### 7. Outcomes of Buddhist Practice

*"Yes, well, it's actually very refreshing. Again, depends on the mood, right? Sometimes it feels like this is a very tedious thing you have to do, spending all your waking hours having to remind yourself your state of mind. In this case, your bodily sensations, but also I'm starting to get more and more convinced, and actually this is a very, very gradual process starting to realize it's an art of leaving. Leaving life, how do you maintain that true happiness in all situations? This is achievable and if one puts in the right effort, the more and more convinced...It's doable. It's very difficult. It's difficult but not impossible."*

## Appendix 11

*Excerpt Of Transcribed Raw Data for Monkey King*

## 1. Sociocultural Background

*“During that time (Cultural Revolution), when my brothers and sister left, my parents were isolated locked up in their school. My father was a professor in university, that's a very good school, very good engineering school. My mother was an accountant in that school and during the Cultural Revolution because of their relatives' roles, one of my uncles was an official for the Guomindang. Due to those reasons, so in Cultural Revolution, people with this kind of background have a very hard time... so both of them were isolated, locked in their room units, and asked them to confess what you have you done in the past, ask them to tell the Zaofanbai what kind of relationship did you have (they interrogated them). They ask them to confess everyday, going outside doing, no more teaching. If you are a professor you are forced to do the labor work, pick up the weeds. My father even went to a brick factory. I went there too to see him... so he was bringing those bricks from the boat to the oven. My father is much skinnier than me, he didn't complain. He was very optimistic. I like him very much, we are very close, much closer than my mother.”*

## 2. Family Influence

*“Well, one is he (father) is a very friendly person and frugal and he is modest, never brag in front of other people. Sometimes he told his stories. He said he did very well when he was in school. He usually doesn't criticize us directly. He will use a good example, to show us a good example. He will probably say when I was young if I did not do well in school (then this would happen). He would not say “You are stupid.” He never say that. He never used harsh words or hit us.”*

## 3. Family of Origin's Religious Practice

*“Well, when I was a child, we, my brother and I would often go to Hanzhou in the east coast. I'm from Shanghai. Hanzhou, it's about 200 km from Shanghai. My mother's brother lived there so when I was a kid, my brother and I would go there during the summer for a couple of months, several weeks, staying with my uncle. Sometimes we went to the Buddhist temple in Hanzhou. In Hanzhou, there's a temple, it's very famous. People know about that so we went there and it's just one of those old buildings, so you go in there the front, you have the heavenly kings, the dharma protectors. You look at them, they look very angry types. After you go inside you see the main hall, there are some gigantic Buddhas. They also have some dharma protectors, but usually when you go inside, no light, very dim light. Look a little bit scary so that's the impression, and of course when I was young, the education was based on communist teaching. There's nothing for the religions, no one is interested in religions at that time, if you are you will be considered something strange. Everyone read, when I was in elementary school, the Cultural Revolution started, so everyone was reading the Red book, the Mao book... so everyone is reading that kind of stuff not Buddhist scriptures even if there is one it will be*



*discarded. You will not take that book in the public and say I'm reading it. People will say that you're strange."*

#### 4. (Participant's) Personhood

*"Right at the beginning of the cultural revolution, the first impact I got was the death of my uncle from my mother's side. He has twin brother. Both of them are very close to us. Sometimes I couldn't tell which one was which. One was a policeman, the other was a mechanic for the Air Force. Before the Cultural Revolution, all those people for the military, they were very admired by people so we like them very much as kids. Sometimes they visit us, I couldn't tell which one, 'He just left, how come he came back so soon?' Everytime they come to our home we buy watermelons. One of them bought watermelons loaded on the three-wheel bikes. One person riding in the front, the other on the back on the back. There's a watermelon so everytime he came he brought a watermelon. Good memories. We like them. Sometimes the police uncle had a gun with him, we wanted to see of course. We never played with it. Sometimes he told us stories about how to catch bad guys, so the impact I got was he...Air force mechanic uncle...he was killed by accident. He already released from the Army. He was working in the factory in Wuhan. He was working on the elevator and it was an accident. He was killed but that was the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, but that was a big impact on me. How could someone die, so strong, how could people die so sudden? So later on, things getting worse, people come to your home, confiscated many things. The Red Guards and the Zaofanbai. Things are just getting worse and worse, but so that's the impact I got later on. The impact from my uncle who was the vice pres (sigh) so you just look at a drama almost."*

#### 5. Poignant Life Experiences

*"(My wife) had very severe mental illness. She went to the hospital. She moved out a couple of times. She imagined she had a lot of money, that she could find someone (else). Finally, she could not live that way and I took her back, so on and off like this for 10 to 15 years. Finally, she started doing things that were out of control. She stole in dept stores, spent all her money, she pulled out her 401 K and spent all of her money."*

#### 6. Process of Buddhist Practice

*"According to Buddhist teachings, it's a place without any bad realms. There are 6 realms. If people are mindful with Amitabha Buddha with his teachings, the person will be reborn and reconnected in the Pureland. That Pureland, you have very good environment. All the other people will be like you or better than you. You have very good opportunity to progress in this world. You have opportunities to learn about Buddhism, but there are also a lot of opportunities to go back go to a retreat. Today you go to the temple, I can listen to the Venerable. Tomorrow you go out of the temple, and you see the other things, and you forget the teachings then you will repeat what you've done in the past which creates a lot of bad karma. So in the Pureland, you don't have this. It's guaranteed, that's what the Buddha taught, and those high cultivated monks*

*taught. If you go to the Pureland, it's just like having an instant camera. You take a good picture all the time. You have the oldest style camera, it's hard to master the skill. Sometimes you have chance to take good pictures sometimes you don't you don't master the skill."*

#### 7. Outcomes of Buddhist Practice

*"Yes, so after I read more books, listen to the Venerable explanations, you realize... I realize she and I must have something in the past. Maybe I owed her something, so no matter what I had done, she will not feel satisfied... so if you can understand that, you will not feel too bad because in the past, in our past lives I believe in reincarnation, if you believe in Buddhist teachings, it makes sense. Everything has its own answer. It makes sense to me... that explains...I don't complain anymore. I feel peace. Otherwise, you will feel resentful, used, if you are expecting something in return, and the thing you expect in return is not as good. Something is illogical but now it makes sense."*

Appendix 12

*Excerpt Of Transcribed Raw Data for Sun*

1. Sociocultural Background

*“Yes, but because of me, you know, you think all the women are married. You belong to the family. You're supposed to give everything to the family. That's why when we get divorced, when we get under the pressure, those things...I'm not that bad, when we get married, always think about the family should be together especially when tolerance so much, but in the end, it's not like that I have lots of negative emotions because I'm not restful, I should have more than this.”*

2. Family Influence

*“Yeah, as long as he's happy, he's ok (ex-husband). That's why I say as long as I obey to what he wants. He's very attached to me...you, when you come back, you have to stay with him all the time. You can't do anything that you want even when you look at the book, that means you have to come home and watch TV with him together, then when you go to sleep, you go to sleep in the morning then you have to get up, make him coffee, make him breakfast. When he come home, the dinner has to be ready. That's the life.”*

3. Family of Origin's Religious Practice

*“I don't think at the time they practiced Buddhism. Like if something happened, they would go to the temple, not really practice. In China, I think people just want to go to the temple, they just go there and pray.”*

4. (Participant's) Personhood

*“So finally, you know, then I say, you keep doing that I'll go crazy. You know, he said, you go crazy that's ok I'll take you to the hospital. Yeah that's where I'm going to end up. I said no way, I'm not going to let myself get there...so that's why finally the doctor said, you feel sorry for everybody, everything you care for everything, but yourself. Without you the world is still turning, that's what I find out later because a lot of time we take the pressure by ourselves.”*

5. Poignant Life Experiences

*“It's getting to the point already 20 years, you already take all the tolerance getting to, you know, say next minute I will be going over. I'm getting too afraid of exploding because also at the same time my sister...she had a condition. She live in my house, the one who had nervous breakdown, I don't want to be like her. See, she's my savior too. An example I don't want to be like her. The women, of course, love the children the most. Why we have to take 20 years because the children. You always think a man will change, they will learn so...and getting to the worse because the more you take the more you give, right? They never...it never ends. With the counselor they say*

*I've got no problem. That's why I say I even almost go into a nervous breakdown, going that much, he didn't even know that's how much...he say he will care for me.”*

#### 6. Process of Buddhist Practice

*“I tried to push myself. Like I told you before, I don't connect with people easily. Like in the beginning, I would say to myself, why are people happy and I'm not and stay to myself. You can't do that. You have to reach out to people because they won't come to you otherwise. Yeah, so I forced myself to meet people even if sometimes it feels hard and uncomfortable, and now I feel very comfortable. I reach out and talk to people, that's a big change, and also, in the past when I used to look at the mirror, I would say, you look ugly, you're not smiling then I told myself you have to smile. My past life was showing on my face. Your face comes from your heart, what's inside will show outside. Yes, my life experiences changed my heart into a rock and that will come out. It's sad then I said I have to change that...so later on, I learned to smile more until your jaw is tired...when you see people try to smile slowly until I feel like my face just naturally smiles.”*

#### 7. Outcomes of Buddhist Practice

*“Yes, you slowly let it go. A lot of people can't let it go because they think they own the people, things. Actually, you don't own anything, not even relationships. You don't own your mother, your children.”*

## Appendix 13

*Excerpt Of Transcribed Raw Data for Upasika*

## 1. Sociocultural Background

*“No, just my dad. He used to have a best friend who was a GP. He was telling my dad it's not good for a woman to be a doctor. It's a tough life and he just believe it because if I was go to med school or not, he's the one supporting me. I just thought with all things happening around me, I just had to get away to have my own life. Whether I wanted to go to med school or not because in high school, we had a biology stream, physics stream. I was in the biology stream. I was in the top 10% of the class and because my school is a very good school sometimes we get special treatment from one of the best universities in Indonesia, so the top 10% in the biology stream can get into the university without having to do the exams. In Indonesia, if you want to go to a public university, you have to take this exam, and when you're a Chinese minority, it's even harder, so to get the opportunity is very good. I just thought I won't go to med school, I'll just go to US to be far away from those problems of the family feud, seeing your parents and grandparents not get along.”*

## 2. Family Influence

*“(Mom is) very strong like when she envisions something, most likely it will happen for us and for my dad sometimes. We can't see what she sees and as a normal person if you can't see it you'll reject, but for her, she will force it because she knows its good. One example, like Chinese, because Indonesia is a non-Chinese speaking country, it's banned since 1965 to 1998. At that time, it's not popular to teach Chinese to your kids because if the government finds out, you'll be in trouble. That's why you see Chinese Indonesians like me who are educated, most likely they will not know Chinese, but I can because my mom forced me to learn Chinese since I was in second grade so I can read and write Chinese, but at that time me and my brother and sister we are so mad because Indonesian is like English ABC and Chinese we're not exposed to that at all. Unless you go to Singapore and Malaysia, it's very hard for a child. I have to learn that language and I'm not exposed to it except when I'm at home with my parents, and my parents buy those books from Singapore everytime. I said I give up, my mom would say no, you have to finish the homework or you'll be punished.”*

## 3. Family of Origin's Religious Practice

*“In Indonesia, the religion course is just like math class. You have to pass the big five subjects before you can move to the next level. Religion is one of them. My parents are not real Buddhists. They're more like traditional Chinese Buddhists. They do the rituals from my dad's side, from my mom's side not so much. So when they got married, they know the general Buddhist teachings but they never know what this is, the specific terms, they just know how to behave. So when I go to school, they automatically say, just participate in the Buddhist classes instead of Christian because we're in first grade we*

*don't know what Christianity or Islam is, but purely memorization to study for the exams.”*

#### 4. (Participant’s) Personhood

*“I feel like, OK, no bonus for a few years and my salary was stuck down there. And when they started having bonus, it was based on my base salary and it was pretty low, not worth it, so I look at other options I can get, and I find out continuing education, go to school, company will reimburse you 100% if you get A or B for grad school.”*

#### 5. Poignant Life Experiences

*“During my undergrad yrs, it was a hard time because I was a student. If I want to hang out with Indonesians, 99% of them are Christians so they go to church. So at one point in my sophomore year, I was feeling lonely, I couldn't find any friends at all. Whenever I met an Indonesian, the first question was, do you want to go to a Care Group on Friday night. Ok, so I thought, maybe I have to sacrifice, maybe I have to open up myself because I have never been exposed to those groups. So when I was in undergrad I thought...those Christian groups are really smart. They have small groups of 10 people they meet every week at somebody's house, share your experience or your problems and people will support you and give you advice. Ok, I don't have friends. I'll just see maybe I'm interested in Christianity. I went to the Care Group for two years on and off, not continuously. I even attended their retreats because Christians have a lot of retreats...Thanksgiving, Christmas. It was a terrible experience. At some point, I was almost convinced myself to get baptized by the people around me.”*

#### 6. Process of Buddhist Practice

*“That's another good thing in myself, before when I experienced pain and suffering, I'll just keep it to myself and cry on my own, but now I'm able to talk it out, and seek advice...connect it to Buddhism. I don't just handle it myself, blame myself for everything that's happening, so most of the time the answer will come back to me.”*

#### 7. Outcomes of Buddhist Practice

*“So all I can do is become a ‘Yes, m’am’ for now (with my mother). Even my sister, she realized my change, how come our mom is so fond of you, always praising you. They know my mom nowadays, she will use me as an example when she's talking to my sister or brother. You have to do this like your sister. My sister asked me what did you do. I told them the (Buddhist) concept but I guess they're just too young. They did not go through (the hardships) so it's hard for them to realize.”*

Appendix 14

*Excerpt Of Transcribed Raw Data for Silent Monkey*

1. Sociocultural Background

*“At the beginning, the civil movement was going on, they tried to get independent from the British in the 1950's. A lot of people tried to gain power, the politicians at that time... Chinese were called overseas Chinese. It seems the Chinese only cared about earning a living so they didn't think it was important to gain political power, so they lost everything. They did not realize you need politics to do things otherwise, gradually, you lose whatever you have.”*

2. Family Influence

*“I saw my parents were always very nice to other people, helping, always trying to do the right things. Maybe this is what molded me towards the Buddhist way. Most of the religions teach people to be kind.”*

3. Family of Origin's Religious Practice

*“Just burn the incense. It's very traditional. It's not the way we practice here, over here you become a Buddhist, you read the book, you learn about the Four Noble Truths. Over there, it's just praying for peace, praying for prosperity, for good luck.”*

4. (Participant's) Personhood

*“I was pretty stubborn, too, don't like to be pushed around...in Buddhism, too. I had friends in Malaysia who gave me books like that, you have to believe it or there's no hope and I resent that.”*

5. Poignant Life Experiences

*“I realized that a lot of things I thought I knew, but it turned out I didn't. I thought I was pretty educated, but when I got to Taiwan, I realized I wasn't because I didn't know a lot of things. It's a different educational system so I had to learn all over again. I read a lot of stuff from US because a lot of stuff in Malaysia is British so it's different content. British are more conservative than Americans. At that time, their style of journalism was more American.”*

6. Process of Buddhist Practice

*“When my father passed away, it was the worst thing that happened in my life. I was here, he passed away in Malaysia. I got a phone call, he'd been sick for a while. It's hard to let go. I believe a lot of things about me, I learned from him and books...when somebody close to me dies then it seems like emptiness...try not to think about it, try to keep myself busy to avoid it...avoid the thing, to occupy myself in something so I don't*

*have to think about it. I think meditation helps to detach from attachments. I want to see myself practice more because when we have a clear mind to see things as they should be rather than how it is.”*

#### 7. Outcomes of Buddhist Practice

*“Maybe through the meditation I can see how I'm doing things. I may see things through other people's eyes. I think I'm more skillful about giving criticisms now, more articulate. My job is demanding and I'm also one of the lead people in my group so sometimes I have to tell people what to do and if they don't do it the way I think it should be done I get upset. Especially the part when I think I'm always right. It's because I'm reacting to what people are doing wrong. I don't know. When one day, I just realized somebody got upset with me maybe because I'm pushy or maybe because they're reacting to what I'm doing.”*



Appendix 15

*Excerpt Of Transcribed Raw Data for Dragon*

1. Sociocultural Background

*“I went to catholic school. I've been in catholic school since 6 or 7 years old. So when I'm in school they teach me the Bible and I don't (find it agreeable).”*

2. Family Influence

*“(My siblings and I) are not possessive. It creates flexibility especially when I moved to college and then my work here especially. Between us when my brother finishes all the chocolate in the fridge my sister doesn't get mad, well, she's going to say something (but) she doesn't get so possessive that she gets upset when she loses something...the sense of detachment is there, not so much of an attachment to things. The same goes with parents, they share. It's easier to let go that way.”*

3. Family of Origin's Religious Practice

*“I simply go to a Taoist temple (with my family). They light up incense, they pray. When I go with my parents, I don't feel connected to the Taoist temple so I just come and follow whatever they're doing. Mostly, they just burn incense. They do that for the many gods that are there.”*

4. (Participant's) Personhood

*“Yes, but I didn't know back then (going to meditation camp changed his behaviors in a positive way), but people can see it though because I started behaving differently. Maybe before I'd be competitive but people can see aggression. I practice a lot, I try a lot to excel. After that (meditation camp), I just accept I excel in other areas. I don't put so much focus on those areas (I don't excel). I focus on the things that I can do.”*

5. Poignant Life Experiences

*“In the past, when I was in college I met a few people who are trying to be friends with me but I found out that...I don't want to say bad things about them because they may believe very strongly in what they believe...what I call ulterior motives (in befriending me) so it presents a very, very bad experience. My first year roommate, my very best friend, he was a Catholic but he never tried to invite me. He goes to Sunday church but he doesn't try to recruit me or anything. When this guy started to recruit me, I kinda feel used. They tried to be friends with me but they have a different motive.”*

6. Process of Buddhist Practice

*“I find out what's very personal to me is the --- of my temper, for example, I used to be fairly light on my words. What hurt people most is empty promises. First year college somebody would ask me to meet me for lunch and I'd say I'd be there, but then I changed my mind in the middle. I don't go and I disappoint that person. One of the (Buddhist) teachings that I take on is for example, the 5 Precepts. One of them is no lying and you can take that as lying and apply that and I believed it was something I should try to get better at. I should not be making empty promises. I took that, try to apply it in every possible instance that I face in my life, everyday. Every occurrence is a new chance.”*

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