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

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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.