

A Different Face: Immigration, Western Converts, and the Sustainability of Traditional
Theravada Buddhism in Two North Carolina Temples
1965-2000s

A Thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Western Carolina University in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of American History.

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October, 2019

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is impossible to truly list and express my gratitude to everyone who made this thesis possible, but I will try my best to do just that. First, I am deeply indebted to my thesis committee chairmen Dr. Robert Ferguson. His patient critiques and continuous encouragement kept me sane and motivated as my work progressed and I continuously questioned myself. I also owe a great deal to Dr. Gael Graham and Dr. Benjamin Francis-Fallon for their service on my committee. Their support was vital in making sure I didn't try to "bite off more than I could chew" in my research, and keeping my honest with my writing mechanics and long-winded ramblings. Finally, I would also like to thank Dr. Michelle Sorenson of the Religious Studies Department. Although she was ultimately unable to stay on my committee through the defense, her expertise on Asian Religions was vital in preparing me to research a religion with which I was extremely unfamiliar with going in.

I would also like to take a moment to thank the people who helped make my research for this project possible, especially in regards to the oral histories I conducted. Much of my research would not have been possible without Bhante Ujotika Bhivamsa and Suzanne Pun of Serenity Insight Meditation Center in Asheville, North Carolina. My interviews with them played a critical role in defining my essential research questions, while also providing me with ideas of other individuals to interview in order to benefit this project. Sunataree Hemawong and Vincent Bove played a similar role at Wat Carolina Buddhajakra Vanaram in Bolivia, North Carolina. Without these individuals, none of what this project has accomplished would have been possible.

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ABSTRACT:

A DIFFERENT FACE: IMMIGRANTS, WESTERN CONVERTS, AND THE
SUSTAINABILITY OF TRADITIONAL THERAVADA BUDDHISM IN TWO NORTH
CAROLINA TEMPLES 1965-2000S

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Since 1965, the factor which has played the largest role in transforming Theravada Buddhism in North Carolina has been the changing demographics, or internal communities, of individual temples. The first temples were largely comprised of Southeast Asian immigrants, while now many are primarily made up of Western converts. This has forced most monks in the state to adopt more Americanized teachings and practices in order to maintain the support system they need to continue practicing in North Carolina.

Introduction

From the Coast to the Mountains: Two Faces of Buddhism

“I see a lot of people becoming more interested. But not only in Theravada, it’s all scattered. Some believe in Zen, some believe in the, like, Divine Healing... So even Bhante (Ujotika) said that in one hundred years Buddhism might have a different face in America.

- Suzanne Pun

“Here (Asheville, NC) not many Burmese families, only two. They cannot come to monastery often so I give favor to Americans. I follow their culture, their traditions, I eat their food. That’s why they come to stay, to stay here, I treat them like Americans. I follow their American culture, I like American culture, I eat American food, I like American food.”

-Bhante Ujotika Bhivamsa

While Buddhism itself has had a visible, if limited, presence in the United States for over a century, it has taken much longer to establish itself in the American South.¹ With the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Alien Land Laws of the 1910s, East Asian immigrants were largely restricted from immigrating to the United States or from achieving any kind of citizenship if they were able to reach America throughout the late 19th and early 20th century.² These legislative acts resulted in an exceedingly low immigration rate of Southeast Asians to Southern states such as North Carolina, and contributed to a small number of Buddhist practitioners in the state.³ The majority of the state’s Buddhists lived relatively isolated lives regarding religious practice, with many being forced to practice their religion at home due to the

¹ Thomas A. Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism: 1844-1912: Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 26.

² Bob Wing, "Crossing Race and Nationality: The Racial Formation of Asian Americans, 1852-1965," *Monthly Review* 57, no. 7 (2005): 7.

³ Jie Zong, Jeanne Batalova and Jeanne Batalova, "Asian Immigrants in the United States," Migrationpolicy.org, March 02, 2017, accessed July 30, 2019, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/asian-immigrants-united-states>; Thomas A. Tweed, *Buddhism and Barbecue: A Guide to Buddhist Temples in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 2.

lack of a formal monastery.⁴ Buddhism in this state had little impact on the religious, cultural, or social landscape of North Carolina, and was largely unaffected by the religious beliefs of native residents. Isolation would remain a fact of Buddhist life in North Carolina until the 1960s, when Southeast Asian immigration would dramatically increase the number of Buddhist practitioners living in the state.

From the late 1800s to the 1960s Southeast Asian immigration to the United States was severely limited due to a series of legislative acts intended to halt, or at least limit, the admittance of these individuals to the country. Although the Chinese Exclusion Act itself was repealed in 1943, the quotas it, as well as the Immigration Act of 1924, established prioritizing European over Asian immigration lingered for another two decades until the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act.⁵ By focusing on excluding so-called undesirable individuals, meaning individuals who were believed to lack apparent economically viable skills, this Act severely limited immigration from China, Japan, and “any other Oriental Country.”⁶ Alien Land laws further limited the ability of Southeast Asian immigrants to establish themselves economically in America, let alone set up a monastic community. Although these laws were first introduced in 1859, and began to be repealed in the 1920s, the last Alien Land Law was not struck down by the Supreme Court until 1966.⁷ Without the ability to cultivate significant land holdings Buddhists immigrants were virtually powerless to set up a public space in which they could practice and

⁴ Bob Meadows, “Center of Faith, Activity,” *The Charlotte Observer*, 4 August 1997.

⁵ “Chinese Exclusion Act,” In *Gale Encyclopedia of U.S. Economic History*, edited by Thomas Riggs, 2nd ed. Detroit, Gale, 2015.

⁶ Joyce J. Chen, “The Impact of Skill-Based Immigration Restrictions: The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882,” *Journal of Human Capital* 9, no. 3 (2015): 298-328, 298.

⁷ Keith Aoki, “Alien Land Laws,” In *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, edited by Patrick L. Mason, 2nd ed. Detroit, Gale, 2013.

spread Buddhist teachings. Clearly these legislative barriers would have to be addressed before any significant Theravada Buddhist presence could be established in North Carolina.

Despite the many difficulties various Buddhist monks and followers faced in their initial efforts to become established in North Carolina, their situation has improved drastically in recent decades. The reduction of national immigration quotas in the latter half of the twentieth century allowed more Southeast Asian immigrants to reach the state, many of whom brought traditional Buddhist practices and beliefs with them.⁸ The explosion of Southeast Asian immigration to the United States has had two profound impacts on the experiences of Buddhism in North Carolina. First, it has resulted in an exponential increase in the number of Buddhist temples in the state, which has provided Southeast Asian immigrant communities a formal place to practice and share their beliefs. Second, it has brought Buddhism to the attention of native North Carolinians at an ever growing rate, resulting in a gradual but clear transformation of the religion. As more Southeast Asian immigrants have founded more and more temples their efforts to preserve Theravada teachings have attracted the attention of a growing number of Western converts; converts who often have drastically different approaches and goals in their interactions with Buddhism.⁹

Throughout Theravada Buddhism's history in North Carolina the state has seen two typical types of temples: those primarily supported by Southeast Asian immigrants and their families, and those chiefly supported by Western converts and sympathizers.¹⁰ These two types of temples often practice Buddhism in strikingly different ways, with Southeast Asian temples

⁸ Jennifer Lee and Frank D. Bean, "Reinventing the Color Line Immigration and Americas New Racial/Ethnic Divide," *Social Forces* 86, no. 2 (2007), 6; Kep Khong, interviewed by Barbara Lau, March 9th, 2003, transcript.

⁹ Will Baunach, Interviewed by Zachary Morgan, June 16th, 2019, transcript.

¹⁰ Wakoh Shannon Hickey, "Two Buddhisms, Three Buddhisms, and Racism," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 11 (2010), 7.

being largely concerned with preserving the traditions of their homeland, and Western converts concerning themselves with the practical/psychological benefits they believe they can gain from Buddhist philosophy.¹¹ While Southeast Asian temples led in transmitting Buddhism, due to the newness of the religion in the region, over time their influence appears to have declined as Buddhism has spread across the state in temples either primarily attended by Westerners or led entirely by Westerners. This decline, caused both by the advanced age of the Southeast Asian immigrants who founded the first temples and increased Western involvement, has led to a profound transformation in how Buddhism is taught and practiced in parts of North Carolina.¹²

The decline of predominately Southeast Asian temples and the rise of Western founded temples has also illuminated clear distinctions between the historical development of both groups, providing historians a clear mode of analysis with which to examine their change over time. Bhante Ujotika, an Asheville based Burmese monk who will feature prominently throughout this thesis, claims that monks in America are often forced to choose between appealing to an Southeast Asian audience or a white American audience, which greatly impacts the nature of that monk's teaching.¹³ More traditional temples, which are especially populated by Southeast Asian immigrants, have been able to preserve traditional teachings and practices despite Western pressures, as evidenced by the teaching materials presented to first time visitors at Wat Carolina in Bolivia, North Carolina.¹⁴ Temples primarily consisting of Western converts typically ignore many traditional beliefs, preferring instead to focus on a philosophy specifically

¹¹ Bhante Ujotika Bhivamsa, interviewed by Zachary Morgan, June 4th, 2019, transcript.

¹² Suzanne Pun, interviewed by Zachary Morgan, June 4th, 2019, transcript.

¹³ Bhante Ujotika transcript.

¹⁴ Venerable Dr. Saddhatissa, *An Introduction to Buddhism* (London, United Kingdom: Buddhapadipa Temple).

tailored towards American life.¹⁵ These differences suggest that the demographics of a Buddhist temple in North Carolina are one of the paramount factors in determining how it has changed over time. Although Buddhism as a whole in North Carolina appears to be becoming more Americanized, monks in Southeast Asian dominated temples have been able to preserve their traditions longer due to the support of the surrounding immigrant community.¹⁶

While the influence of Western converts in North Carolina Theravada temples has steadily grown throughout the tradition's history in North Carolina, that influence should not be mistaken to be one-sided. Southeast Asian Buddhist immigrants, including Theravada monks, are still active participants in shaping how Theravada Buddhism reacts to the influences of American culture. For example, although Burmese monks Bhante Ujotika, who will be featured prominently throughout this thesis, appears to miss some aspects of Burmese Buddhism, he has also enthusiastically embraced some aspects of his new home. In an interview Bhante Ujotika stated that "I follow their (his temple's Western convert members) American culture, I like American culture. I eat American food, I like American food."¹⁷ He has also made the conscious decision in America on to make a separate "Burmese gathering, American gathering," or "Burmese meditation retreat, American meditation retreat" based upon the desires of his current temple community.¹⁸ The active participation of Southeast Asian Theravada monks suggests that although the influence of Western converts is surely growing in North Carolina temples, Southeast Asian immigrants still possess their own agency in regards to the practice of Theravada Buddhism.

¹⁵ Charles S. Prebish, *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 235.

¹⁶ Vincent Bove, interviewed by Zachry Morgan, June 19th, 2019, transcript.

¹⁷ Bhante Ujotika Transcript.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Despite the that Theravada Buddhism has clearly undergone an extensive transformation in North Carolina, it's expression in the state is in no way less authentic than Buddhist practice in Southeast Asia. This thesis is based in the idea that authenticity is an artificial construct which various religious groups produce in their own way.¹⁹ Both Southeast Asian immigrants and Western converts have created their own definition of authentic Theravada Buddhism in North Carolina, rather than following a single concrete ideal. At the temples which shall be the subject of this thesis, authenticity has primarily been constructed by a simultaneous desire to seek historical tradition and modernity when crafting the Theravada teachings they will present. As Chapter 3 will discuss in greater detail, the specific aspects of tradition and modernity which are retained in these temples varies based on the type of community makes up their demographics.

An impressive amount of literature has been produced on Buddhism's introduction into America, focusing on virtually every Buddhist tradition present in the country. Theravada Buddhism began receiving increased attention in the 1970s after the formation of the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Massachusetts, which brought the tradition to a wider American audience.²⁰ A positive aspect of this literature has been its interdisciplinary nature, with historians, sociologists, and religious studies academics, offering their perspectives and interpretations on the subject. Despite the various disciplines of these academics their work has influenced the overall historiography of American Buddhism.²¹ However, it is my assertion that the historiography of this topic has been limited by an excessive focus on Buddhism in urban communities, and an overall neglect of Buddhism in the American South. While this project

¹⁹ Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin, "Tradition, Genuine Or Spurious." *The Journal of American Folklore* 97, no. 385 (1984): 273-290, 273.

²⁰ Will Baunach transcript; Sharon Salzburg and Joseph Goldstein, "IMS History," Dharma.org, 2019, accessed August 8, 2019, <https://www.dharma.org/about-us/ims-turns-40/>.

²¹ Charles S. Prebish, *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 8.

builds upon the current historiography, a major goal of this work will be to utilize the experiences of North Carolina Buddhists to justify further research on Buddhism in the South.

This thesis specifically focuses on one of the three major branches of Buddhism: the Theravada tradition. As will be explained in more detail in Chapter 1, Theravada Buddhism differs from other traditions by arguing that the Pali Canon is the only authoritative source on what the Buddha actually taught. As a result Theravada practitioners consider themselves the purest representation of the “Teachings of the Elders” presented by the Buddha and his followers.²² Theravada Buddhism has principally been carried to North Carolina by Southeast Asian immigrants from Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos, and has typically been perceived by scholars as the most conservative form of Buddhism in terms of doctrine and monastic discipline.²³ Focusing on a single Buddhist tradition, particularly in how it differs from other traditions, should better emphasize the struggle that is occurring among Theravada Buddhists to prevent a blending of various Buddhist practices in North Carolina. Additionally, focusing on the Buddhist tradition that has been identified as the least open to change will provide a clear contrast between traditional and Americanized practices. Even in North Carolina, Theravada monks have been recognized by their followers as being passionately dedicated to preserving traditional teachings.²⁴

The exclusive focus on Theravada Buddhism in North Carolina, as well as the historical focus on transformation over time within the state, led to this thesis concentrating on case studies of two temples at opposite ends of the state. The first, Wat Carolina Buddhajakra Vanaram, was

²² Richard F. Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought* (Sheffield: Equinox Publications, 2013), xv.

²³ John Bullitt, “What is Theravada Buddhism?”, Access to Insight, (2005) accessed July 22, 2019, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bullitt/theravada.html>; Richard F. Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 3.

²⁴ Jim Copp, interviewed by Zachary Morgan, June 22nd, 2019, transcript.

formally founded in June 1988 by Thai immigrants in Bolivia, North Carolina, and is supported by the Buddhist Association of North Carolina.²⁵ Since its inception the temple has been under the stewardship of Abbot Phrakru Buddamonpricha, a Thai immigrant. Abbot Phrakru received classical training in Buddhism from the Supreme Patriarch of Buddhism in Thailand, whom newspapers in North Carolina described as the Buddhist pope.²⁶ As a result of this training Abbot Phrakru has been described by his followers as an extremely traditional Theravada monk whose teachings have strongly appealed to Thai and Laotian immigrants in the region.²⁷ Abbot Phrakru and his siblings founded the Buddhist Association of North Carolina upon the Abbot's arrival in the state with the express purpose of supporting immigrant efforts in promoting Buddhism.²⁸ Due to the temple's intensely traditional background and Southeast Asian demographics, Wat Carolina will serve as a microcosm of the historical transformation of temples based in immigrant communities.

The second temple, Serenity Insight Meditation Center (SIMC), was founded in Asheville in 2009 by Bhante Ujotika Bhivamsa, a monk who was trained at the Moegaun Taike Nyaungyan Pali University in Mandalay, Burma.²⁹ Bhante came to America in 2002 among a wave of Burmese immigrants and refugees fleeing the military government (which portrays itself as a unitary parliamentary constitutional Republic) and eventually made his way to North Carolina in 2008 before founding SIMC, intending for it to serve as a peaceful Meditation

²⁵ Thad Eure, Secretary of State of the State of North Carolina, Articles of Incorporation, Wat Carolina Buddhajakra Vanaram, June 10th, 1988.

²⁶ D.M. Shore, "N.C. Buddhists lay groundwork for first temple," *Wilmington Star*, 7 July 1989.

²⁷ Vincent Bove Transcript.

²⁸ "Wat Carolina History," Wat Carolina Buddhajakra Vanaram, (2003), accessed July 23rd, 2019.

²⁹ Serenity Insight Meditation Center, *Welcome to Serenity Insight Meditation Center (SIMC)* (Asheville, NC: Serenity Insight Meditation Center, 2010).

Center.³⁰ While Bhante Ujotika and Abbot Phrakru both received classical training in historically Buddhist countries, a key difference exists between them which will serve as a critical point of comparison. While Phrakru was invited to the Wilmington area by Thai immigrant relatives who wanted a place to congregate, Ujotika was invited to Asheville by Westerners who had expressed an interest in learning more about Buddhism.³¹ This difference has resulted in significant differences in the teachings and culture at SIMC, further emphasizing the importance of temple demographics in their historical development. SIMC also serves as an illustration of how immigrant-organized temples have diffused and declined over time, with followers from temples like Wat Carolina typically spreading out to found more Western based temples across the state.³²

Serious scholarship on American Buddhism began in the late 1970s and early 1980s, largely due to the fact that historians and academics in related fields had begun to recognize the significance of the lifting of Asian immigrant quotas in 1965.³³ While this was an improvement over the lack of recognition that had characterized Buddhist studies previously, much of the initial historiography was still limited by the conceptual frameworks of the past. For example, Kenneth Inada and Nolan Jacobson's 1984 book *Buddhism and American Thinkers* was a pioneering work that analyzed the impact of Buddhist philosophies on American thought, specifically related to conceptions of self-interest and the nature of change.³⁴ It was also instrumental in recognizing that a new form of Buddhism had been created in America. This

³⁰ Matt McClathcy, "Finding Freedom: Burmese immigrants say they want help to become better citizens," *Tribune Business News*, 28 December 2008; *Welcome to Serenity Insight Meditation Center*.

³¹ Millard Ives, "Building Peace of mind: Buddhists patiently add to Midway Road Complex," *Brunswick Beacon*, 7 July 1989 ; Bhante Ujotika transcript.

³² Vincent Bove transcript.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Kenneth K. Inada and Nolan Pliny Jacobson, *Buddhism and American Thinkers* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), x.

manifestation had been transformed by an American “lens of thought,” resulting in a more democratization.³⁵ Nevertheless, *Buddhism and American Thinkers* was limited by a top down approach that was common in religious studies at the time, focusing on leading American philosophers over ordinary practitioners.³⁶

This approach was continued by Masao Abe’s *Zen and Western Thought*, which continued to focus on Buddhism’s impact on some of the leading American philosophers.³⁷ However, this book did contribute to academic discourse by explaining the impact of differences between Southeast Asian and Western thought in America. Abe argues that it was precisely the difference between these two epistemologies that had created a new Buddhist expression in America, one which differed from any other.³⁸ His analysis allowed academics to consider difference not solely as an obstacle to Buddhist transplants to America, but as something which allowed for a new hybridized tradition. This argument helped encourage academics to focus more specifically on the uniqueness of American Buddhism, not just on the differences between Eastern and Western philosophy.

An influential book that began to challenge the focus on prominent academics was Lenore Friedman’s *Meetings With Remarkable Women: Buddhist Teachers in America*, which helped to introduce gender studies as a frame of analysis for Buddhist studies. One of Friedman’s more prominent arguments was that the most revolutionary effect of American culture on Buddhism was the increase of female involvement, something she claimed went against even the

³⁵ Ibid, xv.

³⁶ Ibid, xiv.

³⁷ Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought* (Honolulu: Palgrave Macmillan, 1985), 84.

³⁸ Ibid, xvi.

original teachings of Buddha.³⁹ *Remarkable Women* was also influential in popularizing the belief that American Buddhism and Buddhist studies had to change in order to adapt to Western life, a belief which has been echoed by religious leaders and academics alike.⁴⁰ While Friedman was not a professional academic, her work encouraged researchers to focus on the democratizing effect of American culture had on Buddhism. Despite this new mode of analysis Friedman was still utilized a top down approach, as her research almost exclusively focused on women who had reached prominent positions in the Buddhist community.

One of the most foundational works in American Buddhist studies was Thomas Tweed's 1992 book *The American Encounter With Buddhism, 1844-1912*, which was crucial in helping to identify many of the defining characteristics of American Buddhism. Tweed was extremely influential in arguing that American Buddhists were willing to embrace Buddhist beliefs as long as they affirmed essential American values.⁴¹ Specifically, he claimed that Americans were willing to embrace the psychological and intellectual contributions of Buddhism, but were reluctant to embrace its perceived nihilistic and nontheistic characteristics which clashed with their Protestant values.⁴² This resulted in American Buddhism essentially being a "Protestantized Buddhism," which was defined by a rejection of practices seen as mirroring atheism or Catholicism. Specifically, many Western Buddhists rejected the perceived lack of theism and abundance of rituals in traditional Southeast Asian Buddhism.⁴³ Tweed was also instrumental in

³⁹ Lenore Friedman, *Meetings with Remarkable Women: Buddhist Teachers in America* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), 4.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 23.

⁴¹ Thomas A. Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism: 1844-1912: Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), x.

⁴² Ibid, 1.

⁴³ Ibid, 20.

encouraging a bottom-up approach to American Buddhism, recognizing its impact among “multiple classes of people.”⁴⁴

The influence of Tweed’s arguments can be seen in Charles Prebish’s *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America*, published in 1999. Prebish continued to focus on topics introduced by individuals such as Tweed and Friedman, including the democratic and feminist nature of American Buddhism. Nonetheless, *Luminous Passage* also demonstrates one of the primary analytical flaws that my thesis hopes to correct: the focus on American Buddhism as an urban development.⁴⁵ *Luminous Passage* even seemed to support that American Buddhism has largely been a city movement, seen in its intensive focus on New York and Los Angeles, and was likely to remain so.⁴⁶ This argument persisted for over a decade, only seriously being challenged in the early 2010s.

An example of this can be seen in James Coleman’s 2001 book *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition*, which showcased the benefits and limitations of the existing historiography. For example, Coleman explicitly supports Tweed’s argument that Buddhism had a significant impact on the masses in America, even arguing that the distinction between monk and layperson had almost been wiped away.⁴⁷ This argument serves as striking evidence of the importance on democratization in the previous literature, supporting the work of academics such as Tweed, Friedman, and Prebish. The principal remaining limitation was Coleman’s support of Prebish’s argument that Buddhism was chiefly a city development. Like most of the prior historiography, *The New Buddhism* gave Western cities the most credit for

⁴⁴ Ibid, 157.

⁴⁵ Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 8.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 16.

⁴⁷ James William Coleman, *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001), 13.

supporting Buddhist development.⁴⁸ Thus, while the scope of academics had broadened along class lines in American Buddhism, it had yet to consider the experience of rural or Southern America.

Among the first studies to discuss Buddhism in rural America was a 2001 book completed by Thomas Tweed and his graduate students entitled *Buddhism and Barbeque: A Guide to Buddhist Temples in North Carolina*. What began as a research project by Tweed's graduate students to trace the development of the Buddhist temples, which had begun to spring up in North Carolina in the 1960s, resulted in a curious, yet pathbreaking, book. One of *Buddhism and Barbecue's* principle contributions was to highlight the importance of the Immigration Act of 1965, which allowed Buddhism to achieve a formalized presence in rural North Carolina. This argument presented the possibility that similar developments could have occurred across the South.⁴⁹ Tweed described North Carolina Buddhism as being an informally practiced religion prior to 1965, with most practices being carried out individually in the woods due to the lack of a formal gathering place.⁵⁰ Interestingly enough, Tweed's conclusions seemed to have a limited impact on historiographical development related to geography for many years, as most of the literature for the following decade continued to emphasize the importance of cities.

Much of the literature in the following decade after *Buddhism and Barbeque* followed trends established by earlier writers. For example, Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann's 2002 book, *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, was influential in arguing that

⁴⁸ Ibid, 20.

⁴⁹ Thomas A. Tweed, *Buddhism and Barbecue: A Guide to Buddhist Temples in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2001), 2.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 3.

Buddhism's appeal to the masses in America had allowed it to grow even faster than it had in Asia.⁵¹ At the same time, *Westward Dharma* is still clearly concerned with large urban immigrant groups, with the majority of its case studies coming from San Francisco and California at large.⁵² These conclusions were echoed in Gary Storhoff and John Whalen-Bridge's 2010 book *American Buddhism as a Way of Life*, which acknowledged Buddhism's impact beyond the 1% of Americans who were official converts.⁵³ However, due to the acknowledged lack of scholarship on specific Asian religious communities, *American Buddhism as a Way of Life* also reserved the bulk of its analysis for immigrant communities in cities.⁵⁴

A turning point in the geographical analysis of American Buddhism came with Richard Seager's 2012 work *Buddhism in America*. One of Seager's chief arguments was that America had developed multiple Buddhist traditions due to the intense regionalism of the country.⁵⁵ Since America is so diverse politically, culturally, and economically, Seager claimed that Buddhism had faced different challenges in each region to which it was introduced, resulting in a variety of transformations and manifestations.⁵⁶ This development encouraged historians and religious academics to move beyond their geographical emphasis on Western cities, analyzing the different expressions of Buddhism across the country. This argument has also helped to encourage a recent development in American Buddhist historiography, analysis of the American South.

⁵¹ Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann, *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 6.

⁵² Ibid, 8.

⁵³ Gary Storhoff and John Whalen-Bridge, *American Buddhism as a Way of Life* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 2.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 162.

⁵⁵ Richard Hughes Seager, *Buddhism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), xiii

⁵⁶ Ibid, 5.

Arguably the first significant study on Buddhism's presence in the South since Tweed's is Jeff Wilson's 2012 book *Dixie Dharma: Inside a Buddhist Temple in the American South*. Wilson states early on that he is explicitly addressing previous historians and ethnographers lack of scholarship on Buddhism in the American South. Wilson argued that in fact meaningful interactions between Asian and Protestant religions had been occurring since the 1970s and 1980s.⁵⁷ Wilson relies extensively on Seager's emphasis on the importance of regionalism in American Buddhism, stressing that it has been perhaps the most powerful force in Buddhism's development in the South.⁵⁸ Wilson argues that the strong presence of conservatism and evangelical Christianity in the American South has created a common regional experience for Buddhists unlike any other across the country, despite the various differences acknowledged in various states.⁵⁹ *Dixie Dharma* stresses the importance of regionalism in the development of American Buddhism in the South, and lays the groundwork for the analysis on the impact of conservative evangelicalism.

Despite Wilson's significant contributions to the historiography, many subsequent publications seem to have ignored his argument on the importance of regionalism in American Buddhism's development.⁶⁰ An example of this can be seen in Scott A. Mitchell and Natalie Quli's *Buddhism Beyond Borders*, which stresses the importance of globalization and technology in the development of American Buddhism.⁶¹ *Buddhism Beyond Borders* even critiques earlier works for being too focused on national, and to a lesser extent regional, studies in American

⁵⁷ Jeff Wilson, *Dixie Dharma: Inside a Buddhist Temple in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University Of North Carolina Press, 2014), 3.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 8.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 13.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 10.

⁶¹ Scott A. Mitchell and Natalie E. F. Quli, *Buddhism beyond Borders: New Perspectives on Buddhism in the United States* (Albany: Suny Press, 2015), 14.

Buddhism, arguing that this methodology has limited understanding of the transnational travels of Buddhism.⁶² It is clear that international impacts on religion are a critical mode of analysis in the era of globalization since aspects of a religion can be transmitted across the world so rapidly. However, one must also remember Wilson's claim that an excessive focus on transnationalism could make it difficult for academics to differentiate between local and international influences on Buddhism's development.⁶³ Thus, one of the chief goals of this thesis will be to support the importance of regionalism in studying the development of American Buddhism, explicitly identifying the American South as a unique experience for American Buddhists.

Finally, American Buddhist historiography has also possessed a long tradition of associating Buddhism's growth in the latter half of the twentieth-century with the influence of the American counter-culture movement of the 1960s. A monograph which played a key role in popularizing this belief was Robert S. Ellwood's 1994 work *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening: American Religion Moving From Modern to Postmodern*. Ellwood argued that it was the counterculture which had played the largest role in encouraging the popularity of Eastern religions among civil rights groups and anti-war activists.⁶⁴ While this argument suggests that Southeast Asian immigration might not have been as important as this thesis will argue, more recent research has suggested that the emergence of Eastern religions in America might not be entirely the result of the counterculture movement. For example, Mark Oppenheimer argued in his 2003 work *Knocking on Heaven's Door: American Religion in the Age of Counterculture* that majority of Americans brought counterculture influences into more "mainstream religious

⁶² Ibid, 3.

⁶³ Wilson, *Dixie Dharma*, 11.

⁶⁴ Robert S. Ellwood, *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening: American Religion Moving From Modern to Postmodern*, (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1994), 4.

groups” they had already been involved with, such as Catholicism and Judaism, rather than converting to an Eastern religion.⁶⁵ This argument suggests that American Buddhist converts were not simply influenced by counterculture in their pursuit of Eastern religions, but instead represent a more “authentic” form of Theravada Buddhism.

It is also important to note the types of sources that this thesis will draw upon, particularly its basis in oral histories. While researching for this thesis I conducted eight oral histories with individuals who have been associated with either Wat Carolina or SIMC. In Asheville I conducted five interviews with the following people: the head monk of the Center, Bhante Ujotika; his Burmese native assistant Suzanne Pun; his American born assistant William Baunach; an American convert named Kasem Mosen; and a North Carolina Baptist named Barbara Mang, who taught an English class Bhante attended. In Bolivia, I was able to interview Phrakru Buddamonpricha’s sister Sunataree Hemavong (who was responsible for inviting Phrakru to the area,) Vincent Bove, an American convert and former novice monk at the temple, and Jim Copp, an American convert who has assisted Phrakru since the temple’s founding. I was given the opportunity to receive a lesson in Theravada teachings from Abbot Phrakru, but was unable to formally interview him due to his difficulty in understanding English in his old age. These interviews were conducted to gain an insider perspective of how these two temples had changed over time throughout their presence in North Carolina, primarily from Wat Carolina’s founding in 1988 to the present, and to achieve insight into how they had interacted with the community.

⁶⁵ Mark Oppenheimer, *Knocking on Heaven’s Door: American Religion in the Age of Counterculture*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003), 3.

Another major goal of these oral interviews was to ensure that this thesis accurately portrayed the Buddhist mindset and experience as accurately and respectfully as possible. Historian Valerie Yow once wrote that while an academic interviewer brings training and disciplinary knowledge to an oral interview, the interview subject brings an intimate knowledge of their own life and a unique perspective which the interviewer may not possess due to their own background.⁶⁶ This was certainly true in my case, as the individuals I interviewed provided valuable insight into Buddhism's place in North Carolina that I never would have comprehended on my own. Oral history can often prove to be a productive dialogue between "orality and writing," where the established methodology of the historian interacts with the unique interpretation of the interviewee and provides the past with meaning it might not have otherwise possessed.⁶⁷ Another motivation for conducting these oral interviews was to ensure that the perspectives and experiences of those personally affected by this history were allowed to illustrate the lived experience of Buddhism's presence in the state.

In *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, Paul Thompson and Joanna Bornat explained further benefits of oral histories. Oral histories can be particularly useful in uncovering the perspectives of individuals which might have otherwise been excluded, and that these individuals can illustrate real life examples of migrating between various cultures.⁶⁸ In a thesis which seeks to argue the importance of Buddhist immigrants migrating between Southeast Asian and American cultures such a methodology is vital, as only individuals who have experienced this migration can truly reveal what that process is like. Take for example Kasem Mosen, an

⁶⁶ Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (Lanham,: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 1.

⁶⁷ Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 10.

⁶⁸ Paul Richard Thompson and Joanna Bornat, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3.

Asheville Buddhist practitioner who was at various times raised in a Muslim, Catholic, and Missionary Baptist household.⁶⁹ My interview with Kasem Mosen illustrated perhaps better than any of my other research the complexities of navigating America's complex religious identities. Without interviews with individuals such as Kasem Mosen it would be impossible to accurately portray how Buddhism has persevered and/or adapted to North Carolinian culture, both at an institutional level and in the daily lives of ordinary citizens.

A final issue that needs to be addressed in regards to the oral histories is the relative lack of balance between the two case studies. This discrepancy is largely due to difficulties arranging interviews with individuals in Bolivia compared to the relative ease in arranging interviews with SIMC. However, this imbalance is also partially a result of the lack of outside sources that have discussed SIMC in comparison to Wat Carolina. Roger Echo-Hawk stated in his article, "Ancient History in the New World: Integrating Oral Traditions and the Archeological Record in Deep Time" that all oral histories should be compatible with other types of evidence that relate to the topic to prevent their conclusions being called into question.⁷⁰ Wat Bolivia's founding in 1988 received substantial outside attention due to its status as the first Theravada temple in the state, resulting in a significant amount of primary and secondary sources which serve to support the interpretations and claims of the three interview subjects.⁷¹ SIMC, for reasons that shall be further elaborated upon, has attracted significantly less outside attention than Wat Carolina, placing greater importance on the oral histories. While this methodology is not without its

⁶⁹ Kasem Mosen, interviewed by Zachary Morgan, June 7th, 2019, transcript.

⁷⁰ Roger C. Echo-Hawk, "Ancient History in the New World: Integrating Oral Traditions and the Archaeological Record in Deep Time," *American Antiquity* 65, no. 2 (2000): 271.

⁷¹ D.M Shore, "Buddhists join other supporters at retreat site," *Wilmington Star*, 3 July 1989.

imperfections, it is one that explicitly addresses the strengths and weaknesses of my research in each case study.

Regarding the terminology used in this study, in every instance possible I have chosen to use the Pali word for important Buddhist teachings and philosophies, even though most of these words have a Western translation. The Pali language is significant for being a language known and spoken by virtually all Theravada monks, as well as being the language in which the most essential Theravada texts were written.⁷² I chose to use Pali words in my writing whenever possible in order to better portray my research from a Buddhist perspective, particularly since Pali is so important to Theravada Buddhists. It is also the language that my oral history subjects predominately utilized when referring to key Buddhist teachings and practices, especially Bhante Ujotika and Abbot Phrakru.⁷³ Using Pali terminology in my writing best represents my interview subjects perspectives and beliefs and provides another example of the differences between traditional and Western Buddhism.

The statements and claims from the oral histories have been supplemented by extensive archival research. Historian Donald Ritchie wrote that the more controversial a subject was the less an oral interview is able to stand alone as evidence, a statement which especially applies when examining an individual's personal religious beliefs.⁷⁴ The Special Collections at UNC Wilmington were particularly illuminating due to the universities prior research on Wat Carolina, with a substantial number of sources gleaned from the Buddhism in North Carolina Collection.

⁷² "Pali Language," In *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia*, by Encyclopedia Britannica, Britannica Digital Learning, 2017.
https://login.proxy195.nclive.org/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/ebconcise/pali_language/0?institutionId=2378.

⁷³ Bhante Ujotika Transcript; *Introduction to Buddhism*.

⁷⁴ Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 114.

The Barbara Lau Collection at UNC Chapel Hill provided excellent comparative information on the experience of Theravada Buddhist immigrants in the state, while the James Cannon 3rd Papers Collection from Duke University provided useful scholarly research on the teachings of Buddhism in East Asia and America. These collections, among others, will serve to clarify and bolster the conclusions reached by my oral interviews.⁷⁵

Chapter 1 of this thesis will extensively document the background of Theravadin Buddhism in Thailand and Burma, transitioning into how these traditions and individuals were translated into communities within North Carolina. Specific attention will be paid to the areas and monasteries Phrakru Buddamonpricha and Ujotika Bhivamsa came from, as well as the historical development of their individual temples. Beginning in this manner will provide a baseline for how Buddhism was practiced and expressed in its traditional homes, which will further emphasize the changes that have taken place across many temples in North Carolina, including SIMC. It will also be useful in demonstrating the comparative lack of change in temples like Wat Carolina, inviting inquiry into why these temples developed differently than others. This background information will then be utilized to transition into specific examples of how North Carolina temples compare to their Southeast Asian counterparts, and the role that temple demographics have played in their historical development.

Once crucial historical context has been established, Chapters 2 and 3 will analyze and assess the specific differences between Southeast Asian and North Carolina Buddhism. Chapter 2 will focus on how the two temples interact with their members and communities, as well as how they sustain themselves in their respective communities in North Carolina. It will examine

⁷⁵ James Hoopes, *Oral History: An Introduction for Students* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 2.

both the differences and similarities that exist with the conditions in East Asia. The comparisons will begin here due to my assertion that a monk's support system is vital to his survival in North Carolina, meaning that it is likely that he will have to tailor his message to attract his specific support system.⁷⁶ Chapter 2 will also examine how the local communities in which Wat Carolina and SIMC exist have, or have not, affected their teachings and behaviors. This section will chiefly serve to challenge Jeff Wilson's claim that Buddhists in the South have been forced to adopt a subdued presence, rather than practice their beliefs openly, in order to avoid religiously conservative backlash from the community.⁷⁷

Chapter 3 will center upon how Theravada Buddhist traditions are taught and practiced in the United States compared to Thailand and Burma. An overarching theme will be the effects that North Carolinian desires for practicality and utility have altered the teachings and culture of each temple. At the same time, it will also examine how the desire of Western converts to find an "authentic" Southeast Asian Buddhist experience has influenced their search and interactions with traditional Theravada monks. By examining these effects, Chapter 3 will dispute the claim that Southeast Asian and North Carolinian practitioners possess vastly different goals and outlooks when approaching Buddhism. The differing attitudes between Southeast Asian immigrants and Western converts has often been compared to the experiences of traditional American Christians and new converts.⁷⁸ Chapters 2 and 3 in tandem should make it explicitly clear how Buddhism has developed in these two North Carolina temples, as well as the role that

⁷⁶ Susie Poppick, "Report: The Last of the Saffron Monks," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religious and Public Life*, no. 209 (2011), 2.

⁷⁷ Wilson, *Dixie Dharma*, 35.

⁷⁸ Vincent Bove transcript.

the transition from Asian immigrant organized temples to Western organized temples has had in that development.

Ideally this thesis will help inspire historians and religious studies academics to further examine the development of Buddhism in Southern states like North Carolina, a field that has been largely ignored during the explosion of Theravada Buddhism research in recent decades.⁷⁹ For example, my research has made clear that SIMC and Wat Carolina are not the only temples in North Carolina which have changed over the years due to the decline of Southeast Asian immigrant participation, as temples such as Wat Carolina Greensboro are undergoing similar changes as their original immigrant population (in this case Cambodian) ages.⁸⁰ Further research is needed to confirm that this is a phenomenon which is consistent throughout the state, as well as other states in the American South. It would also be fascinating to see a study utilizing this lens of analysis in one of the other major Buddhist traditions in the state, examining what influence Americanization, and Tweed's Protestantized Buddhism, has had upon their teachings. A few of my interview subjects suggested that the struggle between traditional and American practices is so intense in Theravada Buddhism because of its status as the oldest (and closest to the original) teachings of the Buddha.⁸¹ Overall, this is a field that has a wealth of untapped potential and information awaiting exploration. It is my sincere hope that this thesis will play some small part in inspiring other researchers to carry this topic forward.

⁷⁹ Wendy Cadge, *Heartwood: The First Generation of Theravada Buddhism in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 20.

⁸⁰ Math Hai and Nas Kai, interviewed by Barbara Lau, January 19th, 2003, transcript.

⁸¹ Jim Copp Interview, Sunataree Hemavong Interview.

Chapter 1

Born a Buddhist: Theravada Buddhism Prior to Its Arrival in North Carolina

“You know, in Burma, people are Buddhist or people are born in Buddhist communities. Since they are born... people understand what is a Buddhist teaching and what is not, and since they were born it looks like they are very brainwashed like that.”

-Bhante Ujotika Bhivamsa

In order to fully appreciate the fundamental changes which have occurred in Buddhism since its introduction to North Carolina, one must first have a working knowledge of the nature of Theravada Buddhism in its original Southeast Asian setting. Many Theravada monks in North Carolina have continued to maintain the traditional practice of avoiding crossover between the different Buddhist traditions, despite pressures from their congregations to do so. For example, solely presenting Theravada teachings is something which is extremely important to both Bhante Ujotika and Abbot Phrakru.⁸² Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religious tradition in both Thailand and Burma, and is therefore the core of the teachings that Wat Carolina and SIMC have been spreading in North Carolina since their inception. Theravada Buddhism has an extremely old and proud tradition, claiming to be purest incarnation of the teachings of the Buddha. Pride in their beliefs has inspired many traditional Theravada Buddhists to passionately distance themselves from other traditions, especially the Mahayana tradition.⁸³ The following chapter will

⁸² Bhante Ujotika transcript, Jim Copp transcript.

⁸³ Edward Fried, "The Buddhist Paradox of the Liar: A Quinian Defense of the Doctrine of Expedient Means," *Philosophy East and West* 64, no. 3 (2014): 598-638. <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed July 22, 2019): 600; Bhante Ujotika transcript.

present a history of the Theravada Buddhist tradition in Burma and Thailand, concluding with how these traditions were reached Southern states such as North Carolina.

The Classic Dhamma: Buddhist Teachings in a Southeast Asian Context

According to most Theravada Buddhists and scholars, Theravada Buddhism had its beginnings in Sri Lanka in 250 BCE when Emperor Asoka of India sent a mission to the island to convert its inhabitants to Buddhism.⁸⁴ As soon as rival traditions began to form Theravada Buddhism laid claim to being the preserved original teachings of the Buddha, with early Sri Lankan histories claiming that humans first settled in the area on the precise day that the Buddha passed away.⁸⁵ Theravada Buddhism distinguished itself from competing interpretations primarily by a strict adherence to the Pali Canon, core scriptures of the religion which are believed to be the preserved teachings of the Buddha and his closest disciples collected and arranged following his death.⁸⁶ The tendency of Theravada Buddhists to only regard the Pali Canon as authoritative has led to much of its strife with the other traditions. Most Theravada monks, including Bhante Ujotika and Abbot Phrakru, reject the teachings of the Mahayana texts which came later.⁸⁷ The vast majority of the native North Carolinians who make or made up the congregations of Wat Carolina and SIMC were unaware of the differences between Theravada texts and the texts of other traditions. This confusion assured that both monks would be concerned with emphasizing the distinctness and superiority of Theravada traditions.

⁸⁴ Noble Ross. Reat, *Buddhism: A History* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1994), 84.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Tadeusz Skorupski and Kenneth Roy. Norman, *The Buddhist Forum. the Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai Lectures 1994* (New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1997), 76.

⁸⁷ Thero, *What the Buddha Taught*, xv

The Pali Canon is split into the Tipitaka (three baskets), each of which focuses on a particular category of Buddhist teaching and/or philosophy.⁸⁸ These baskets are of particular interest in American context because of the difference in how they are taught and received, with Western and Southeast Asian practitioners placing different values on each. For example, the third basket is known as the Abhidhamma Pitaka (higher doctrine basket), and deals with esoteric supernatural phenomenon which traditional monks consider critical in understanding the other teachings of the Buddha.⁸⁹ However, Western members of Wat Carolina and SIMC are typically more comfortable with the first two baskets, the Vinaya Pitaka (the discipline basket) and the Sutta Pitaka (the teaching basket). These baskets deal with issues that Westerners feel are more applicable to their daily lives, and also don't seem to challenge their worldviews and perspectives in the same way that the Abhidhamma Pitaka does.⁹⁰

Certain portions of Buddhist teachings are generally well understood by all practitioners in Wat Carolina and SIMC, among both Southeast Asian and Western followers. Their popularity suggests that these teachings have been the easiest to transplant to North Carolina audiences as the religion has progressed. Among the first teachings a visitor to either temple will receive are the Three Noble Truths, which deal with the causation and cure of suffering.⁹¹ These Truths connect to the Eightfold Path (The Middle Way) to eliminating personal suffering and achieving nibbana (nirvana), which consists of obtaining right views, right aspirations, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right rapture. For clarification, "right" in this instance means behaviors which are best suited to eliminating

⁸⁸ James Cannon 3rd Lecture Notes: The Pali Canon (The Tripitaka), undated, UA.29.02.0067, Box 7, Folder 5, James Cannon 3rd Papers, 1912-1974, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Durham, North Carolina, United States, 4.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Kasem Mosen transcript.

⁹¹ Saddhatissa, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 11.

suffering and eventually achieving nibbana. The ultimate goal of following the Middle Way is to break free from the Ten Fetters which cause suffering, which would allow practitioners to end personal suffering and achieve a state of loving kindness (a state in which one causes no suffering to other living beings).⁹² As Buddhism was transplanted into North Carolina throughout the second half of the twentieth century, these teachings became even more pronounced than they were in Burma and Thailand. This development invites the question as to why these teachings have prospered at the expense of others.

Perhaps the most well-known of the Buddhist Dhamma (teachings, spelled Dharma in Western translations) are the Pancasila (Five Precepts), which many practitioners in America have equated to the Ten Commandments.⁹³ The Pancasila consists of guidelines against harming any living beings, dishonesty and stealing, sexual misconduct or misusing of the senses, lying or any other form of wrong speech, and the use of intoxicants such as alcohol or drugs which may cloud the mind.⁹⁴ While these teachings may seem very straightforward and easy to comprehend, the way they were understood and practiced in East Asia and in America actually differs greatly. The first Buddhists who brought the Precepts to North Carolina, the Western founding members of the IMS, quickly realized that some of them clashed with aspects of American culture, resulting in a need to change the way the Pancasila was portrayed in the region.⁹⁵ Some Precepts have been simplified, taught to be followed only temporarily, or have occasionally been outright ignored.⁹⁶ For example, Southeast Asian immigrants at SIMC have noted that many Western

⁹² James Cannon 3rd Lecture Notes: Buddhism, Miscellaneous, 1929-1933, UA.29.02.0067, Box 7, Folder 4, James Cannon 3rd Papers, 1912-1974, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Durham, North Carolina, United States, 12.

⁹³ Will Baunach Transcript.

⁹⁴ Saddhatissa, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 30.

⁹⁵ Suzanne Pun Transcript.

⁹⁶ Vincent Bove Transcript.

practitioners tend to liberally interpret the Precept prohibiting alcohol use, either following it occasionally or not at all.⁹⁷ Most are also unaware of the fact that in Southeast Asia this Precept warns practitioners against “becoming intoxicated with things like status and wealth and power,” or anything else that could potentially cloud one’s mind.⁹⁸ The adjustments the Five Precepts have undergone in Wat Carolina and SIMC alone suggest that a larger historical trend has occurred throughout Buddhism’s arrival in North Carolina. In many cases Southeast Asian monks have altered some of the most basic Theravada Buddhist teachings in order to adapt to the local culture of their new home.

Before transitioning into the specific history of Buddhism in Thailand and Burma it is worthwhile to mention some more of the esoteric teachings of Buddhism. In North Carolina these teachings have been known to make first-time Western listeners, such as SIMC’s Will Baunach, to respond with: “what the hell is that about!”⁹⁹ An example of these teachings are the belief in kamma (karma) and rebirth, beliefs which many traditional Southeast Asian Buddhists are reluctant to share in North Carolina due to baffled reactions they often receive.¹⁰⁰ Kamma is the belief that the good deeds and evil deeds that a person commits can follow them from life to life, bringing them either great joy or great suffering. Further, Theravada Buddhists believe that the kamma a person builds up in each life will directly dictate what life a person will be born into in their rebirth cycle. In other words: we build our own heavens or hells and experience them in the next life.¹⁰¹ Theravada Buddhists, especially traditional ones in East Asia, were also not the atheists they were often portrayed to be in the West, but instead believed that all gods (including

⁹⁷ Suzanne Pun Transcript.

⁹⁸ Vincent Bove Transcript.

⁹⁹ Will Baunach Transcript.

¹⁰⁰ Sunataree Hemavong Transcript.

¹⁰¹ Saddhatissa, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 19.

gods from virtually every religion), angels, and demons were individuals who were bound by the same kamma and rebirth laws as human beings.¹⁰² Historically, North Carolina has followed the rest of the nation in disregarding or misinterpreting these beliefs. Most of the Western converts at SIMC and Wat Carolina accept the importance of kamma, but reject the idea that it's influence continues throughout multiple lifetimes.¹⁰³ This is a development that represents one of the most sizable differences between Buddhist expression in Southeast Asian and America.

An essential esoteric teaching popular in Southeast Asia is the Theravada belief regarding the 31 realms, the 31 worlds Buddhists believe a person will be reborn into before they are able to break free of the rebirth cycle. Traditionally these realms are represented in the Bhavacakra (The Wheel of Life), which depicts core human behaviors such as delusion, anger, and passion, as well as their effect on one's placement in the rebirth cycle.¹⁰⁴ There are five major realms presented in the wheel: the realm of the gods, the realm of the hungry ghosts, the realm of hell, the realm of animals, and the realm of humans.¹⁰⁵ A person moves throughout the realms in each life based on their kamma, with the good or bad kamma someone has built up in past and present lives determining into which realm they will be born.¹⁰⁶ Good kamma will cause a person to be born into a better realm, such as the human or heaven realms, while bad kamma might result in a rebirth in the animal or hell realms. The Bhavacakra is a key component of traditional Theravada

¹⁰² James Cannon 3rd Lecture Notes: Buddhism, Miscellaneous, 1929-1933, UA.29.02.0067, Box 7, Folder 4, James Cannon 3rd Papers, 1912-1974, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Durham, North Carolina, United States, 10.

¹⁰³ Will Baunach Transcript; Kasem Mosen Transcript; Sunataree Hemawong Transcript.

¹⁰⁴ Phrakru Buddamonpricha, *The Wheel of Life*. Bolivia, North Carolina: Wat Carolina Buddhajakra Vanaram.

¹⁰⁵ Phrakru Buddamonpricha, *The Wheel of Life and Death*, Bolivia, North Carolina: Wat Carolina Buddhajakra Vanaram.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

Buddhism, and can be frequently seen in various depictions across Southeast Asia.¹⁰⁷ It has received more of a mixed reception in America and North Carolina, a development which shall be explored in greater detail in Chapter 3.

The Way of the Elders: Theravada Buddhism in Burma and Thailand

Theravada Buddhism remained in a state of flux in Sri Lanka due to conflicts with other traditions and monks for centuries until it finally became the leading form of Buddhism on the Southeast Asian mainland in 1070 ACE. This domination was largely the result of a political union between Sri Lanka and Burma to overthrow Chola domination.¹⁰⁸ The alliance allowed Theravada Buddhism to become solidly established in Burma by 1086 when a Theravada Buddhist rose to the throne of the country, setting the stage for its spread across Southeast Asia. This spread increased when the Thai people began to immigrate south across the Chao Phrya River Valley in the thirteenth century, possibly to avoid the aggression of the Mongols. The arrival of the Thai in this region set up a centuries-long conflict between the Thai and Burmese to see who would be the dominant power in the region.¹⁰⁹ Increased interaction between the Burmese and Thai peoples resulted in the Thai adopting Theravada Buddhism by the end of the thirteenth century, which ultimately culminated in the spread of the religion to Laos and Cambodia throughout the fourteenth century. From this point on Theravada Buddhism would continue to be the chief religion throughout most of Southeast Asia, despite later European pressures and the ascendancy of Mahayana Buddhism across Central and East Asia.

¹⁰⁷ Photographs of Buddhist worshippers and sites in Thailand, undated, UA.29.02.0067, Box 7, Folder 5, James Cannon 3rd Papers, 1912-1974, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Durham, North Carolina, United States, 1.

¹⁰⁸ Reat, *Buddhism: A History*, 91.

¹⁰⁹ David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 56.

While Thailand and Burma both share a common Theravada background the tradition has not developed identically in both countries. These histories contribute to the practices and attitudes of Wat Carolina and SIMC due to their differing ethnic backgrounds. A key difference between Burma and Thailand is the fact that Burma eventually fell under colonial rule, with Great Britain gaining access to the entire western portion of Burma in 1826.¹¹⁰ Burma's loss of political autonomy resulted in Theravada Buddhism becoming even more important to the Burmese people than it had been previously. Buddhism became the only substantial symbol of national unity after the collapse of the traditional monarchy in 1886, making it the key component of Burmese identity.¹¹¹ The Burmese became fiercely protective of their Buddhist heritage, frequently organizing throughout the turn of the twentieth century in order to prevent the decline of Buddhism in the country.¹¹² The effects of this intense devotion can be seen to this day, with even Thai Buddhists acknowledging that Burmese monks might be the strongest and most dedicated of all Theravada Buddhists.¹¹³

The Burmese were able to finally achieve official political independence in 1942 by aiding the Japanese in taking Burma from the British. However, harsh treatment of Burmese citizens by the Japanese encouraged a resistance movement to help the Allies invade the country in 1945.¹¹⁴ From this point Burma was able to maintain a democratic government until 1962, when General Ne Win led a military coup that established a single-party authoritarian system.¹¹⁵ Conflicts between the military government would lead to two of the major immigration waves

¹¹⁰ Reat, *Buddhism: A History*, 118.

¹¹¹ Alicia Marie Turner, *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2017), 5.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Sunataree Hemavong, interviewed by Zachary Morgan, July 25th, 2019, transcript.

¹¹⁴ Shelby Tucker, *Burma: The Curse of Independence* (New Delhi: Penguin Press, 2002), 7.

¹¹⁵ Amy Cooper, "Burmese Americans," In *Gale Encyclopedia of Multicultural America*, edited by Gale. 3rd, 2014, 1.

from Burma in the twentieth century. The first came in the 1960s after Ne Win's takeover, the second in the late 1980's as a result of backlash against the pro-democracy civil protests against the government in 1988, otherwise known as the 8-8-88 movement.¹¹⁶ The political turmoil in Burma and resulting immigration was largely responsible for creating a substantial Burmese presence in America. Despite the suffering Ne Win's regime inflicted upon his people, Ne Win was very public about his alleged dedication to Buddhism, ensuring that Burma would maintain a national identity as a Buddhist country throughout the remainder of the twentieth century.¹¹⁷

During this same time period, the Buddhist experience in Thailand varied significantly from Burma, largely due to the fact that a European imperial power never occupied the nation. The Thai people were not as dependent on dedication to Buddhism in maintaining their national identity as the Burmese and instead took great pride in their traditional democratic monarchy.¹¹⁸ This national pride in the government has caused Buddhism to be much more connected to the state than it has been in Burma, forming a reciprocity relationship in which the state and Buddhism legitimize and support each other.¹¹⁹ Thus Buddhism has been able to maintain a dominant presence in Thailand despite possessing several differing characteristics from Burma. While Buddhists in Burma have frequently served as the leaders of protest movements against their government, Thai Buddhism has served to bolster the state rather than protest it. "Political Buddhism," or Buddhism which helps to serve the interests of the states, has been a part of Thai culture as early as the fourteenth century. The relationship between state and religion ensured

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 3.

¹¹⁷ Bruce Matthews, "Buddhism under a Military Regime: The Iron Heel in Burma," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 33, No. 4, (April 1993), 408-423, 414.

¹¹⁸ Reat, *Buddhism, a History*, 121.

¹¹⁹ Somboon Suksamran and Trevor Oswald Ling, *Political Buddhism in Southeast Asia: The Role of the Sangha in the Modernization of Thailand* (London: C. Hurst, 1977), x.

that Thai Buddhism would develop in a manner which was historically unique in all of Southeast Asia.

Theravada Buddhism has been the state religion of Thailand since the 1200s, when King Rama Khamhaeng began to officially support monastic institutions throughout the region.¹²⁰ These institutions were unique because they were organized in a similar manner to Khamhaeng's civil administrators, with Khamhaeng also serving as the supreme patron of the Thai Sangha (order of Buddhist monks and nuns).¹²¹ This is a position that the Thai kings were able to maintain for centuries and it allowed the monarchy to control portions of Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia at various points over the next several centuries. As mentioned earlier, Thailand was unique among the Southeast Asian countries in never having been controlled by an imperial power. Ironically, Thai independence ultimately made it one of the most internationally interconnected countries in all of Southeast Asia. Thailand is often recognized as one of the most Westernized nations on the continent.¹²²

Since the end of World War II, Thailand has been in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand it is one of the most significant voices on Buddhism in the modern world, while on the other hand being a nation deeply influenced by Western society. Thai Buddhism is so influential that neighboring countries, such as Indonesia, which have seen a decline in Buddhism in their own regions have requested the help of Thai monks in fostering a Buddhist revival.¹²³ The United States sought to informally influence the nation following World War II by granting it economic aid, protecting it from economic influence by European powers, and by establishing it

¹²⁰ Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 30.

¹²¹ Reat, *Buddhism, a History*, 122.

¹²² Trevor Ling, *Buddhism, Imperialism and War: Burma and Thailand in Modern History* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1979), 3.

¹²³ Dari Catatan Pribadi Bhante Sombat, *The Rise of Buddhism in Indonesia and the History of the Construction of Vihara Jakarta Dhammacakka Jaya*.

as a relaxation area and tourist destination for American troops and citizens.¹²⁴ While US presence has arguably had many benefits on Thai society, it has also increased the prevalence of the drug trade, organized crime, and the infamous “sex tours” undertaken by Western tourists.¹²⁵ These controversial aspects of Thai society make it remarkable that Buddhism has been able to maintain such a strong presence in the country, a presence that largely owes its success to the place of the monarchy and the Thai Sangha in national pride. Many magnificent Buddhist temples and landmarks have been preserved well into the modern era, making Buddhism a pilgrimage destination for Buddhists from all over the world.¹²⁶

The End of the Quota: Buddhist Immigration to America

With the history of Buddhism in Thailand and Burma now outlined, the immigration of Buddhists from these countries to America can now be understood in their historical context. The circumstances under which each nation sent immigrants to the country, as well as the specific nuances of the Buddhism they brought with them, had a direct impact on the development of both Wat Carolina and SIMC. It is a key argument of this thesis that the progress of both temples were radically different even at this beginning stage. For example, Abbot Phrakru and Bhante Ujotika came into the country under contrasting circumstances. These circumstances motivated Wat Carolina and SIMC to rely upon differing sources of support in order to sustain themselves. Further, the avenues of support each temple received directly correlated with the impact of Westernization upon their culture and teachings. While Southeast Asian immigration as a whole has increased since the 1965 Immigration Act and the turmoil of the Vietnam War, Burmese and

¹²⁴ Reat, *Buddhism: A Short History*, 127.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Photographs of Buddhist worshippers and sites in Thailand, undated, UA.29.02.0067, Box 7, Folder 5, James Cannon 3rd Papers, 1912-1974, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Durham, North Carolina, United States, 34.

Thai immigrants have not arrived in America under identical circumstances. Therefore it is necessary to examine the history of Burmese and Thai immigration to the United States.

The 1965 Immigration Act was crucial in developing Buddhism in North Carolina by allowing more monks to arrive and become established in the state. Prior to 1965 there was a strict quota system on immigration into the United States, with the primary immigration stream being limited to those of European ancestry.¹²⁷ Chinese Immigration had been limited since the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and the legislation proposed by Congress in 1924 placing a quota on all Southeast Asian immigration was approved by President Hoover in 1929.¹²⁸ As a result of this law, very few Buddhist Asian immigrants were able to settle in America for almost a hundred years, with the ones who did congregating in coastal urban centers such as Los Angeles and New York.¹²⁹ Buddhism in North Carolina was a largely invisible and isolated practice, with some practitioners choosing to practice alone in nature due to the lack of a formal meditation center in their area.¹³⁰

With the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act, along with further reforms against hemispheric immigration caps in 1976, Asian immigration to the United States exploded. Many of these immigrants brought their traditional Buddhist practices with them, including the Theravada tradition.¹³¹ In the decades prior to the 1965 Immigration Act the percentage of Asians among American immigrants ranged from 3 percent to 5.4 percent; by the next decade

¹²⁷ Jane Hong, "The law that made America diverse; When Congress overhauled immigration in 1965, it ended a racist quota system – and helped created today's border problem.", *Los Angeles Times*, 2 October 2015.

¹²⁸ Mae M. Ngai, "The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law: A Reexamination of the Immigration Act of 1924," *Race, Law and Society*, 2017, 69.

¹²⁹ Gurinder Singh Mann, Paul David Numrich, and Raymond Brady. Williams, *Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs in America: A Short History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 21.

¹³⁰ Quoted in Alex Albright, "Satori in Rocky Mount: Kerouac in North Carolina," in Leslie H. Garner, Jr. and Arthur Mann Kaye, eds., *The Coastal Plains: Writings on the Cultures of Eastern North Carolina* (Rocky Mount: North Carolina Wesleyan College Press, 1989), 89.

¹³¹ Scott Keys, "Immigration Act of 1965," In *Encyclopedia of Immigration and Migration in the American West*, by Gordon Morris Bakken, and Alexandra Kindell, Sage Publications, 2006.

that percentage had doubled to 11.2 and as of 2010 had reached 33.7.¹³² Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand and Burma in particular saw a great expansion in immigration, with the average number of immigrants from this region rising from 8,000 to 63,000 between the 1960s and the 1970s.¹³³ This rapid increase in immigration eventually paved the way for voluntary Southeast Asian immigrants to reach Southern states such as North Carolina by the 1970s, which in turn resulted in the founding of the state's first convert Buddhist temples.¹³⁴ The 1970s were a particularly important decade for the establishment of Theravada Buddhism, with immigrants such as Suzanne Pun, Bhante Ujotika's Burmese assistant, noting that that decade was the first time Theravada Buddhists from Thailand and Burma began to bring their traditional practices to Western audiences.¹³⁵

Thai immigration peaked between the 1970s and 1980s when less skilled immigrants were given the opportunity to enter the country. Almost half of the 166,815 Thai immigrants who have come to the country since the 1965 Immigration act arrived throughout the 1980s.¹³⁶ This wave of immigration saw Abbot Phrakru and his family arrive in North Carolina in 1986 when Phrakru and his sister chose to place their site in Bolivia. The temple's location on Midway Road was chosen due to the "good vibrations" of the area and perceived spiritual connection to the area's former indigenous inhabitants.¹³⁷ This perceived spiritual connection was encouraged by Sunataree Hemawong's belief that she had been a member of this indigenous tribe in a past

¹³² Timothy J. Hatton, "United States Immigration Policy: The 1965 Act and Its Consequences," *The Scandinavian Journal of Economics* 117, no. 2 (2014): 353.

¹³³ Morrison G. Wong, "Post-1965 Asian Immigrants: Where Do They Come From, Where Are They Now, and Where Are They Going?" *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 487, no. 1 (1986): 155.

¹³⁴ *Buddhism and Barbeque*, 3.

¹³⁵ Suzanne Pun transcript.

¹³⁶ Wendy Cadge and Sidhorn Sangdhanoo, "Thai Buddhism in America: A Historical and Contemporary Overview," *Contemporary Buddhism* 6, no. 1 (2005): 5.

¹³⁷ Vincent Bove Transcript; Sunataree Hemawong Transcript.

life. Because of the relative stability and prestige which Thailand had maintained in the years leading up to 1965 Thai immigrants came to America under radically different circumstances than those from Burma, a country which has historically undergone significant turmoil. Thai immigrants came to North Carolina with comparatively higher rates of prosperity and organization, which resulted in Thai temples like Wat Carolina interacting with American culture in a way temples such as SIMC often cannot match.

There are a few details which set Thailand immigration apart from other Southeast Asian countries. The first of these being the fact that a substantial proportion of these immigrants have been women, largely made up of Thai women who married American servicemen while they were stationed there during the Vietnam War.¹³⁸ Many of the first supporters of Wat Carolina were Thai women who had married servicemen from Fort Bragg or Camp Lejeune and desired a Buddhist center close to their new home.¹³⁹ America's involvement in Thailand also affected the economic status of the first wave of immigrants, with the initial post-1965 wave being professional individuals who had been exposed to the economic prosperity and culture of the United States.¹⁴⁰ It would not be until the 1970s and 1980s that less skilled Thai immigrants were able to make their way to North Carolina. Their arrival, however, did push admissions numbers to their greatest height in the second half of the 1980s.¹⁴¹ The number and relative prosperity of the initial Thai immigrants ensured that temples like Wat Carolina would possess a reliable source of support.

¹³⁸ Tanachai Mark Padoongpatt, "'A Landmark for Sun Valley': Wat Thai of Los Angeles and Thai American Suburban Culture in 1980s San Fernando Valley," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 34, no. 2 (2015): 6.

¹³⁹ Jim Copp Transcript.

¹⁴⁰ Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 266.

¹⁴¹ 1969-1975, Annual Reports of the Immigration and Naturalization Service; 1976-2000, Immigration and Naturalization Service Statistical Yearbooks.

Another important factor to keep in mind in regards to Thai immigration is the clear devotion that many continued to show to Theravada Buddhism and the connection that continued to exist between this tradition and the Thai state. A considerable majority of Thai immigrants to America brought their Buddhist faith with them. Also, approximately one fifth of all Buddhist immigrants after 1965 are listed as Thai.¹⁴² The devotion of Thai immigrants has been encouraged by the Council of Thai Bhikkhus, an organization affiliated with the Thai National Sangha which oversees the life and practices of Thai Buddhist monks in the United States. The most relevant function of the organization for our purposes is its dedication in providing travel documents for new monks, funding the formation of new temples, and providing philosophical guidance on Buddhist teachings to American monks. These practices have ensured that Thai temples in North Carolina have direct support from the Thai government.¹⁴³ Wat Carolina directly benefited from this practice from the very beginning; Abbot Phrakru was originally given his permit to practice as a monk from the Thai government, and was given permission to open a temple in Bolivia by the state-supported Supreme Patriarch of Buddhism in Thailand.¹⁴⁴

Substantial Burmese immigration to the United States began at roughly the same time as from Thailand, but the circumstances under which they emigrated has significantly altered their experience in North Carolina. While most Buddhist Thai immigrants who came to the country arrived with some government support and were often relatively prosperous due to their connections to the United States, Burmese immigrants predominately arrived fleeing from some sort of government upheaval as refugees. Burmese immigration also owes its existence to the 1965 Immigration Act, with the first wave occurring in the mid 1960s in response to the

¹⁴² Cadge and Sangdhanoo, "Thai Buddhism in America," 25

¹⁴³ Ibid, 8.

¹⁴⁴ Tracy Rose, "Faithful of ancient traditions search for peace in new home," *Wilmington Star*, 20 November 1990.

aforementioned military coup in 1962.¹⁴⁵ The second wave occurred in the 1980s, again as the result of refugees fleeing a government coup. The 8-8-88 coup occurred in 1988 when university students began to protest the government's policies of promoting economic isolation and military control of the country. Many of these activists fled the country when Burma's military government responded by reportedly killing thousands of protestors and democracy supporters.¹⁴⁶ The third wave of immigration began in the early 2000s and was again instigated by harsh government repression against civil liberties.¹⁴⁷ Bhante Ujotika arrived in America as a result of this final wave of Burmese immigration, one of the many Burmese monks who fled their government's blatant disregard of the Buddhist values of loving kindness and basic compassion.¹⁴⁸

Because of the lack of stability Burma has experienced throughout its history, especially in comparison to countries like Thailand, Burmese monks often face a unique set of challenges other monks may not. One of the chief examples of this is the lack of government support Burmese monks experience, resulting from the lack of a unified state religion to support the founding of their temples. Instead of being able to call upon a state Buddhist patriarch like Abbot Phrakru, Bhante Ujotika's center began in 2008 when Westerners, after meeting Bhante Ujotika at his Mills River center, invited him to bring his teachings to the Asheville area.¹⁴⁹ The lack of homeland support has been a common problem among many Burmese monks in America who arrived during this third wave of immigration. Most of these monks fled due to their direct

¹⁴⁵ Nehginpao Kipgen, "Societies in Political Transition: A Comparative Study of Burma Under Ne Win and Indonesia Under Suharto," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 47, no. 6 (2012): 752.

¹⁴⁶ "BURMA: Military Coup." 1988. *Oxford Analytica Daily Brief Service*, Sep 19, 1.

<http://proxy195.nclive.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/192415611?accountid=14968>.

¹⁴⁷ Cooper, "Burmese Americans," 1.

¹⁴⁸ Poppick, "The Last of the Saffron Monks," 2.

¹⁴⁹ "Welcome to Serenity Insight Meditation Center"; Bhante Ujotika Transcript.

involvement in Burmese pro-democracy movements.¹⁵⁰ Many of these monks, including Bhante Ujotika at SIMC, have been forced to rely heavily on support from Westerners in America to survive. This dependency has caused SIMC's historical development to deviate significantly from temples such as Wat Carolina. Many Burmese monks have been forced by their lack of immigrant support to lessen their adherence to the many rules and regulations Theravada monks are expected to follow, with some even abandoning their vows altogether.¹⁵¹

The conditions under which Burmese immigrants have arrived in the country has limited their ability to support Buddhist monks in America, at least in comparison to Thai immigrants. Once again this issue is largely a result of the small-mindedness of the Burmese government, which typically limits its citizens' exposure to English classes and American culture.¹⁵² When Thai immigrants came to America their exposure to American culture and economic aid prepared them to transition into American society relatively well, while many of Burma's third wave of immigrants have had difficulty adjusting to a culture to which they were denied access. Even educated Buddhist monks are directly affected by this suppression. For example, due to government restrictions Bhante Ujotika was unable to gain proficiency in English until he took classes under a North Carolina Baptist named Barbara Mang.¹⁵³ SIMC has also directly suffered as a result of the difficulties facing Burmese immigrants, as the two Burmese families who live in the area are only able to visit the center once or twice a month.¹⁵⁴ However, this is in no way to suggest that Burmese immigrants have not made enthusiastic attempts to support their local monks. An excellent example of these attempts can be seen in Burmese native Suzanne Pun's

¹⁵⁰ Poppick, "The Last of the Saffron Monks," 2.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 3.

¹⁵² Christina Fink, *Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule* (Bangkok: White Lotus, Press 2001), 27.

¹⁵³ Barbara Mang, interviewed by Zachary Morgan, June 12th, 2019, transcript.

¹⁵⁴ Bhante Ujotika transcript.

decades long support of Bhante Ujotika, support which was vital in allowing him to begin SIMC.¹⁵⁵

Buddhists Find Safe Haven: Wat Carolina and SIMC in North Carolina

A common characteristic that both SIMC and Wat Carolina share is an overall increasing dependency on Western support for the survival of their monks and monasteries. However, the nature of dependency has differed over time based on the involvement of Southeast Asian immigrants in each temple. Many practitioners of both temples have noted that this dependency has been the defining factor in determining how they respond to the influence of American culture.¹⁵⁶ This section will begin with the history of Wat Carolina and transition into the history of SIMC for two specific reasons. First, this decision works chronologically simply because Wat Carolina was founded in the 1980s while SIMC wasn't founded until 2009. Second, it works thematically because the relationship between Wat Carolina and SIMC represents the gradual decline that immigrant-organized Buddhist temples appear to be experiencing in the state. When Wat Carolina began it was the first Theravada temple in the entire state and attracted hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of Buddhists along the East Coast. In more recent decades attendance has declined in number as the religion has spread across the state into temples such as SIMC.¹⁵⁷

The groundwork was laid for the foundation of Wat Carolina by Abbot Phrakru's brother and sister, Southone Hemavong and Sunataree Hemavong, who had moved to the Wilmington area in North Carolina fourteen years earlier.¹⁵⁸ These individuals proved particularly influential in the founding of the temple, especially Sunataree Hemawong. Sunataree Hemawong originally

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Bhante Ujotika transcript; Jim Copp transcript; Vincent Bove transcript; Will Baunach transcript.

¹⁵⁷ Box 47 folder 13, page 24; Sunataree Hemavong Interview.

¹⁵⁸ At Bolivia for a State Center, undated, Box 47, Folder 13, Buddhism: Dr. Walter H. Conser Jr. Papers- Wat Carolina Buddhajakra Vanaram- Wilmington/Bolivia; Theravada – Thailand, Randall Library Special Collections, Wilmington, North Carolina.

secured the land for the temple and provided the initial donation with profits from her Oak Island Motel.¹⁵⁹ Wat Carolina was founded in a similar manner to many other Thai temples, beginning originally to provide Thai immigrants with “a place for the practice of meditation.”¹⁶⁰ From the very beginning, Wat Carolina explicitly sought to preserve the original form of Theravada Buddhism. Many things have changed at the temple, but this is one aspect that multiple members claim will never change.¹⁶¹

All of Abbot Phrakru’s family were instrumental in funding the construction of the site in Bolivia, with Southone providing assistance with profits from his restaurant business in Myrtle Beach.¹⁶² Interestingly, the temple was also able to get members and organizations in the community involved by inscribing the names of donors on certain parts of the temple when they were completed.¹⁶³ The temple’s connection to the Thai national Sangha was also crucial as well. For example, the temple initially received regular support from high ranking Thai monk Chao Khum Phra Tanavarodom. At this time Chao Khum was internationally recognized as the second highest ranking monk in all of Theravada Buddhism.¹⁶⁴ Buddhists in Thailand provided a great deal of financial support in the founding of the temple and its construction, helping to raise approximately one million dollars, in conjunction with the Abbot’s local family, in order to construct the initial buildings.¹⁶⁵ With the support of Thai people both in America and abroad Wat Carolina was able to get off to a modestly prosperous start.

¹⁵⁹ Kristin Boyle, “Buddhist invite you for a peaceful visit,” *Wilmington Star News*, 18 September 2005.

¹⁶⁰ Susan Usher, “Buddhists Find Peaceful Haven,” *The Brunswick Beacon*, 7 July 1988.

¹⁶¹ Jim Copp transcript; Vincent Bove transcript.

¹⁶² Richard Rubin, “Buddhists plan Brunswick temple,” *The Wilmington Morning Star*, 16 July 1988.

¹⁶³ Jim Copp transcript; Wat Carolina Buddhajakra Vanaram Kathin Ceremony Schedule, October 21, 1990, Box 47, Folder 13, Buddhism: Dr. Walter H. Conser Jr. Papers- Wat Carolina Buddhajakra Vanaram- Wilmington/Bolivia; Theravada – Thailand, Randall Library Special Collections, Wilmington, North Carolina.

¹⁶⁴ Usher, “Buddhists And Well-Wishers Break Ground at Temple Site.”

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

One of the defining characteristics of Wat Carolina's philosophy is that its members, including the monks, should not engage in any evangelical behavior. Theravada Buddhists claim that this practice was inspired by the Buddha's prediction that not everyone would be prepared to hear the Dhamma in all of their lifetimes.¹⁶⁶ While this tradition served Buddhism well in countries such as Burma and Thailand where the whole community was expected to support the monastery in order to maintain their merit, it initially gave Wat Carolina a very mysterious and puzzling reputation in North Carolina communities which lacked a Buddhist background.¹⁶⁷ Many local residents were ill informed of the group's beliefs due to their lack of direct engagement in the community. Reverend Robert Bogart of Antioch Baptist church stated in 1988: "the Buddhists slipped in completely unaware of us (his Christian congregation)... It did come as a shock for us in the community."¹⁶⁸ Sunataree recalled that this pastor wasn't especially welcoming when the center was founded, disliking the fact that a non-Christian religious organization had entered his community.¹⁶⁹ Founding member Jim Copp also recalled that some "rednecks" would purposefully drive by and rev their engines in order to disturb the Buddhists; despite this, no formal protest ever occurred.

Although it appeared initially that Wat Carolina received a chilly reception in Bolivia, its relationship with the community has improved greatly in the years since its founding. Within a few weeks of Bogart's initial comments members of the Antioch church gathered to learn about and participate in Buddhist rituals. In fact, members of Antioch's congregation took the initiative in these interactions in order to present themselves as better neighbors and ambassadors of

¹⁶⁶ Vincent Bove transcript.

¹⁶⁷ Phramaha Somsak Sambimb, interviewed by Barbara Lau, April 15th, 1997, transcript.

¹⁶⁸ Jennifer Essen, "Bolivia church learns about Buddhist faith," *Wilmington Morning Star News*, 28 August 1988.

¹⁶⁹ Sunataree Hemavong transcript.

Christianity.¹⁷⁰ Later that year Raleigh Baptist pastor Dee Froeber led members in visiting the two monks who lived at the temple to learn more about their beliefs.¹⁷¹ Many local residents began to bring their families in order to learn about other faith systems, while churches would frequently bring their youth groups in order to educate them about Buddhism.¹⁷² One of the likely reasons for this paradigm shift in the temple's relationship with the community is its aforementioned tradition of refraining from evangelicalism, which appears to make Christian communities feel less threatened by its presence. In my interview with Barbara Mang of Hendersonville Baptist Church she claimed that members of her church had never felt threatened by the presence of Buddhists in their community. Barbara claimed, referring to the rest of her congregation, that: "Buddhists do not intimidate people in any way shape or form."¹⁷³ Clearly one of the defining factors in Wat Carolina's historical development has been the discreet presence the temple has maintained in Bolivia.

The lack of Theravada temples in North Carolina in the 1980s made Wat Carolina a prominent gathering place among Theravada Buddhist all over the country in its early years. When Wat Carolina was founded it was one of the only Theravada temples on the entire East Coast, initially being the only one between Washington D.C. and Atlanta.¹⁷⁴ Wat Carolina became a central gathering point for Theravada Buddhists all along the East Coast, attracting individuals from a multitude of states, backgrounds, ages, and nationalities. Buddhist holiday celebrations were huge events which attracted hundreds, and even thousands, of Buddhists from all over the world. The temples groundbreaking ceremony in 1989 alone attracted hundreds of

¹⁷⁰ Essen "Bolivia church learns about Buddhist faith."

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Mike Voorheis, "I,40 – Learning Life Lessons at Buddhist monastery," *Wilmington Star News*, 5 February 2011; Jim Copp transcript.

¹⁷³ Barbara Mang transcript.

¹⁷⁴ Usher, "Buddhists And Well-Wishers Break Ground At Temple Sight."

Buddhists from several states and countries.¹⁷⁵ Also present at the ceremony were the Most Venerable Chao Kin Phra Yanavarodom, the Secretary General of the Dhammayut Sangha Vanaram, and Somdej Phra Nyanasamvara, the Supreme Patriarch of Thailand.¹⁷⁶ These large numbers also initially necessitated a larger number of monks than currently resides at the temple, with three full-time monks and several part time monks presiding on the property as late as 2005.¹⁷⁷

Despite the manner in which Wat Carolina's presence in Bolivia began, most current members, especially the older ones, appear to agree that the temple has declined in recent years. Abbot Phrakru is the only remaining full-time monk present at the temple, as most of the other monks have gone on to join or found temples of their own across the Southeast.¹⁷⁸ Theravada Buddhism has begun to spread across the state from Wat Carolina because many Southeast Asian immigrant communities have been able to found temples closer to their homes. Evidence of this spread can be seen in the number of Theravada temples which emerged in the state between the 1980s and present day.¹⁷⁹ As a result, these practitioners no longer have to travel the long distance to Wat Carolina.¹⁸⁰ This exodus of monks and practitioners from Wat Carolina has diverted resources and attention from the temple, forcing Abbot Phrakru to rely almost entirely upon his aging family members and initial founders for support. Sunataree particularly cites this aging as the cause of the temples' recent decline.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁵ Ibid

¹⁷⁶ Ground Breaking Ceremony, Multipurpose Building: Wat Carolina Buddhajakra Vanaram, July 2nd, 1989, Box 47, Folder 13, Buddhism: Dr. Walter H. Conser Jr. Papers- Wat Carolina Buddhajakra Vanaram- Wilmington/Bolivia; Theravada – Thailand, Randall Library Special Collections, Wilmington, North Carolina.

¹⁷⁷ Boyle, "Buddhists invite you for a peaceful visit."

¹⁷⁸ Vincent Bove Transcript.

¹⁷⁹ Tweed, *Buddhism and Barbeque*, 52

¹⁸⁰ Sunataree Hemavong transcript.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

One of the temples which has arisen amid the decline of immigrant founded temples like Wat Carolina is the Serenity Insight Meditation Center. SIMC has the distinction of being the first Burmese and Theravada temple founded in the Asheville area.¹⁸² SIMC has a much shorter history than Wat Carolina, having only been founded in 2009. However, this short history illuminates a great deal about the differences between temples founded primarily by Southeast Asian immigrants and temples which chiefly rely on Western support. SIMC also serves as a clear example of how Theravada Buddhist teachings has spread across the state from centers like Wat Carolina, evidenced by the working knowledge of Buddhism Western members of the temples possessed before they encountered Bhante Ujotika.¹⁸³ Finally, SIMC has also been profoundly shaped by Bhante Ujotika's experiences in Burma, demonstrating a clear difference between the historical impact of Thai and Burmese Buddhism in North Carolina.

Bhante Ujotika initially arrived in the United States in 2002 and settled at a Burmese Theravada monastery in Boston, Massachusetts. He was motivated to flee Burma because of the government's mistreatment of the Burmese people and its monks.¹⁸⁴ Bhante spent four years at the monastery in Boston, something which is noteworthy due to the significant differences in what he experienced there compared to his eventual life at SIMC. For example, when Bhante lived in Boston his temple was surrounded by a variety of Southeast Asian communities including Vietnamese, Chinese, and Tibetan immigrants. These communities weren't opposed to loud celebrations during Buddhist holidays and often directly participated in the celebrations. The temple demographics were also very similar to those at Wat Carolina, with Burmese

¹⁸² Suzanne Pun transcript.

¹⁸³ Bhante Ujotika transcript; Will Baunach transcript; Kasem Mosen transcript.

¹⁸⁴ Bhante Ujotika transcript; Christine Kearney, "Burmese monks who fled to U.S. a vanishing breed," Reuters.com, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-myanmar-monks/burmese-monks-who-fled-to-u-s-a-vanishing-breed-idUSTRE64C2BS20100514>, March 14th, 2010.

individuals attending every day and only a couple of Westerners attending at all.¹⁸⁵ Bhante's experience in Boston serves as further evidence of the impact an immigrant population can have on a Buddhist temple, demonstrating the differences between a temple with Southeast Asian and Western supporters.

After meeting Burma native Suzanne Pun in 2007 Bhante decided to set up a Buddhist temple in the South, following the advice of his teacher who wanted to increase the number of Burmese monasteries in the region and spread Theravada Buddhism.¹⁸⁶ Bhante's first North Carolina center was located on farmland purchased in the Mills River area, located in Henderson County, which consisted of two trailers for Bhante to live and teach in.¹⁸⁷ During his time in Mills River, Bhante also took English classes with Barbara Mang, and English second language teacher, at Hendersonville First Baptist Church, becoming much more proficient in English than he had been previously.¹⁸⁸ Dhamma talks, or lectures, at this center were poorly attended, with some Sunday services only attracting two or three attendees.¹⁸⁹ Very few individuals in the agrarian community of Mills River expressed serious interest in becoming involved in the Mills River center. Poor attendance inspired Bhante and Suzanne to seek a new location which might attract more followers to the Theravada tradition. Fortunately for them, individuals from the Asheville area, such as Bhante's future assistant William Baunach, had become interested in Theravada Buddhism and were seeking a traditional teacher. Several of these individuals periodically began to come to the center and expressed an interest in learning from Bhante.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁵ Bhante Ujotika transcript.

¹⁸⁶ Suzanne Pun transcript.

¹⁸⁷ "Welcome to Serenity Insight Meditation Center."

¹⁸⁸ Barbara Mang transcript.

¹⁸⁹ Suzanne Pun transcript.

¹⁹⁰ Will Baunach transcript; "Welcome to Serenity Insight Meditation Center."

At the behest of these Westerners Bhante and Suzanne moved to the Asheville area by the end of 2008, officially opening SIMC in 2009. This interaction has been the principal cause behind the diverging historical developments between Wat Carolina and SIMC, and arguably between many temples in the state. Most of these individuals, about a dozen in total, who invited Bhante Ujotika to come to Asheville were Westerners, and these individuals constitute the bulk of SIMC's congregation.¹⁹¹ By Bhante's own admission this has encouraged him to somewhat alter his teachings and behavior at SIMC and cater to the individuals upon whom he depends for support. Some of these changes include bringing in a Western assistant to give Dhamma talks from an American point of view, as well as altering the manner in which SIMC displays itself to the community. These changes are perhaps the best example of how Buddhism has developed in different ways during its history in North Carolina.

The experiences of SIMC and Wat Carolina have not differed entirely, however. One clear example of similarities is SIMC's relationship with the Asheville community. SIMC has continuously strived to maintain a low profile in Asheville, a decision initially motivated by fears of the South's racist reputation.¹⁹² Southern states, including North Carolina, have often been accused of portraying immigrants as bringers of crime, cultural decline, loss of crucial resources, and a lack of respect for local laws, initially motivated many Asian immigrants to maintain a low profile in their respective communities.¹⁹³ However, many members acknowledge that the center has had a negligible impact on the community and vice versa. Like other Theravada temples, SIMC makes little to no effort to interact with any of the churches or non-Buddhist religious

¹⁹¹ "Welcome to Serenity Insight Meditation Center."

¹⁹² Suzanne Pun transcript; Bhante Ujotika Transcript.

¹⁹³ Suzie S. Weng, "Asian Immigrant Integration in the Southern Region of the United States," *Journal of Social Science and Public Policy*, Vol. 56, Issue 1, 63-67, 64; D.J. Hopkins, "Politicized Places: Explaining Where and When Immigrants Provoke Local Opposition," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 100, Issue 1, 40-60, 45.

organizations in the area.¹⁹⁴ Bhante and Suzanne have described the churches in the area as being accepting of their presence, and roughly a dozen self-identified Christians are regular attendees of SIMC.¹⁹⁵ Wat Carolina and SIMC both appear to share a desire to limit direct evangelism into their respective communities. This decision has limited their overt influence in North Carolina, but has perhaps also eased their transition into Bolivia and Asheville respectively.

Theravada Buddhism has followed a fascinating path into North Carolina, one which has been deeply influenced by its original home in countries like Thailand and Burma. The circumstances of immigration, level of support from a Southeast Asian government, and size/organization of immigrant communities in North Carolina have been instrumental in determining how individual temples respond to the pressures of American culture. By focusing specifically on case studies at Wat Carolina and Serenity Insight Meditation Center, Chapters 2 and 3 will provide a detailed examination of how these factors have caused two temples in the same Buddhist tradition to develop in strikingly different ways. Special attention will also be paid to how the decline of immigrant led temples like Wat Carolina have further exacerbated these differences, placing the future of North Carolina Buddhism more and more in Western convert hands at Wat Carolina and SIMC. It is entirely possible that Bhante Ujotika's prediction of Buddhism having a new face in America in one hundred years might come to pass, with temples such as Wat Carolina representing the past, and temples like SIMC representing the future.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ Will Baunach transcript; Kasem Mosen transcript; Bhante Ujotika transcript; Suzanne Pun transcript.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Bhante Ujotika transcript.

Chapter 2

Avenues of Support: The Translation of the Buddhist Sangha From Southeast Asia to North Carolina

“And they (Buddhists in Burma) know traditional believing, they are very generous; know to support monks, to support themselves. There (in Burma) monks don’t need to do anything, worry about food or resting places because people there are very generous... But here, especially in this area, only two Burmese families in the Asheville area... So they couldn’t come every day, so I have to survive myself.”

-Bhante Ujotika Bhivamsa

“And before we came here (North Carolina) there was an American who jokingly said: “don’t go to the South, they’ll burn down your place.” And we were kind of cautious, but we didn’t experience anything like that.

-Suzanne Pun

Internal and External Communities: The Key to Sustainability in North Carolina

One of the most dramatic transformations that Buddhism has undergone as a result of its arrival in North Carolina is the reshaping of Buddhism’s place in local communities. Buddhism has always possessed a unique relationship to its local communities due to the extensive rules and regulations the Buddha placed upon those who chose to live a monastic lifestyle.¹⁹⁷ Just a few examples of these regulations include prohibitions against handling money, touching women, preparing their own food, and the eating of any food after noon.¹⁹⁸ Traditional Theravada monks are even expected to abstain from simple chores such as mowing their lawn

¹⁹⁷ Stephen C. Berkwitz, *South Asian Buddhism: A Survey*, (New York: Routledge Press, 2012), 15.

¹⁹⁸ Mary Jo Meadow and Elizabeth Harris, "Buddhism: Theravada Buddhism," In *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Religious Practices*, edited by Gale. 2nd ed. Gale, 2015.

due to the Pancasila's strict condemnation of the harming of living beings. The most strict practitioners even apply this belief to insects living in the grass as well as the grass itself.¹⁹⁹ In countries with a deep historical adherence Buddhism, such as Thailand and Burma, a monk's strict lifestyle doesn't typically hinder his life significantly due to the extensive and near constant support the monastery receives from the local community.²⁰⁰ Unfortunately these restrictions have presented a much greater challenge in America due to the comparative lack of long-time Buddhist practitioners in the country, as well as the growing reliance of individual temples on Western converts for daily support. These developments have resulted in many Western temples and practitioners being unaware or opposed to the role they are expected to play in the support of a monk.²⁰¹ As a result, a North Carolina monk's relationship with his or her community differs from historical Southeast Asian communities due to their lack of traditional avenues of support.²⁰²

Another aspect of Southern and North Carolina communities worth noting is the high levels of racism and religious intolerance various immigrant groups have reported, something which many Southeast Asian immigrants were apprehensive of when first arriving in North Carolina.²⁰³ Jeff Wilson made significant waves in the Religious Studies community with his 2012 book *Dixie Dharma: Inside a Buddhist Temple in the American South* when he argued that the South's religiously conservative culture was the chief obstacle Buddhists had to surmount to

¹⁹⁹ Suzanne Pun, interviewed by Zachary Morgan, June 4th, 2019.

²⁰⁰ Julia Cassaniti, *Living Buddhism: Mind, Self, and Emotion in a Thai Community*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 14.

²⁰¹ Susie Poppick, "Report: The Last of the Saffron Monks," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religious and Public Life* no. 209 (2011), 2

²⁰² Vincent Bove, interviewed by Zachary Morgan, June 19th, 2019; Bhante Ujotika Bhivamsa, interviewed by Zachary Morgan, June 4th, 2019; Sunataree Hemavong, interviewed by Zachary Morgan, June 25th, 2019.

²⁰³ Aihwa Ong, Virginia R. Dominguez, Jonathan Friedman, Nina Glick Schiller, Verena Stolcke, David Y. H. Wu, and Hu Ying, "Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making: Immigrants Negotiate Racial and Cultural Boundaries in the United States," *Current Anthropology* 37, no. 5 (1996): 737-762, 737.

become established in the region.²⁰⁴ *Dixie Dharma* argued that the conservative religious climate of the South had created an unwelcoming environment for many Southeast Asian immigrant Buddhists, a situation- he argued- which was further exacerbated by the September 11th terror attacks.²⁰⁵ However, oral history research at Wat Carolina and SIMC demonstrated the positive reception most Buddhist immigrants received in North Carolina. Sunataree Hemavong even readily stated that the word “happy” was the best way she could describe her experiences in North Carolina and interactions with the local community.²⁰⁶ These accounts differ drastically from the conclusions of Jeff Wilson, suggesting that the experience of Buddhist immigrants in the South was much more varied and complex than he suggested.

This thesis makes clear that the religious communities in Buddhist temples differ in several key ways from other groups. Two specific types of communities had a direct impact on the historical development of Wat Carolina and SIMC: internal and external communities. “Internal community” refers to the individuals who at least semi-regularly attend Buddhist services and have a direct impact upon their teachings and culture. Some temples in North Carolina have a predominately Southeast Asian internal community, like Wat Carolina, while some predominately consist of Western practitioners, such as SIMC.²⁰⁷ “External community” refers to the local community which was already present before Buddhism arrived in the area, communities which in North Carolina are predominately Protestant. The internal communities of Wat Carolina and SIMC have been vital in determining how traditional Theravada teachings

²⁰⁴ Jeff Wilson, *Dixie Dharma: Inside a Buddhist Temple in the American South*, (Chapel Hill: University Of North Carolina Press, 2014), 154.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 162.

²⁰⁶ Sunataree Hemavong Transcript.

²⁰⁷ Ben Steelman, “Buddhists, Others Celebrate Coming of Thai New Year,” *Wilmington Morning Star*, 15 April 2000; *Welcome to Serenity Insight Meditation Center (SIMC)* (Asheville, NC: Serenity Insight Meditation Center, 2010).

were altered in North Carolina, while the reaction of the external community is decisive in deciding how each temple will portray itself to the outside world.

While both Wat Carolina and SIMC have experienced significant difficulties in obtaining enough support for their respective monks, Wat Carolina's greater immigrant population initially allowed them to better weather this trial than SIMC.²⁰⁸ There are significant differences between SIMC, founded in 2009, and Wat Carolina, founded in 1988, which clearly represent the historical development of Buddhist communities in North Carolina.²⁰⁹ Western-organized communities such as SIMC's appear to have become the rule rather than the exception in recent years partially due to the aging, and therefore lessening involvement, of Southeast Asian immigrants who arrived after 1965.²¹⁰ The communities upon which a Buddhist temple in North Carolina depends for support is crucial in determining how that temple adapts to the pressures of American culture, as well as how it interacts with the outside community. Understanding the relationship between Wat Carolina and SIMC to their internal communities is crucial in recognizing how traditional teachings from East Asia have transitioned into a North Carolina setting. A major goal of this chapter will be to demonstrate the importance of a temple's internal community in dictating how it transformed throughout its history in North Carolina.

This chapter will also critique Wilson's arguments about Southern Buddhism by comparing his conclusions to the experiences of Wat Carolina and SIMC. Some scholars have criticized *Dixie Dharma* for generalizing about the South, arguing that it over-emphasized individual cases of racism and religious intolerance as evidence of the entire region's hostile

²⁰⁸ Jim Copp, interviewed by Zachary Morgan, June 22, 2019; Vincent Bove Transcript, Bhante Ujotika Transcript.

²⁰⁹ "Welcome to Serenity Insight Meditation Center"; Sunataree Hemawong Transcript.

²¹⁰ Sunataree Hemawong Transcript.

reaction to Buddhism.²¹¹ While this project concedes the significance of the struggles non-Christian religions have had in the South, the case studies in Wat Carolina and SIMC should greatly complicate this generalized view. There have been several documented accounts of religious cooperation and coexistence in the South, examples which include a variety of Buddhist traditions.²¹² Wat Carolina and SIMC have both made conscious attempts to mitigate potential backlash from their respective external communities. However, the worst the majority of members have reported in response to their activities in recent years is indifference. This development will not be analyzed in a manner which encourages readers to view the South through rose colored glasses, but will instead be recognized to highlight the ability of traditional Theravada Buddhists to adapt to their surroundings.

“The People There are Very Generous”: Traditional Relationships in Southeast Asian Buddhist Communities

In traditional Theravada countries, including Burma and Thailand, Buddhist communities exist in a reciprocal relationship. The monk supports the community by presenting the Dhamma and guidance towards enlightenment, while the community supports the monk by providing for his basic daily needs.²¹³ Bhante Ujotika recalled that in Burma this support was so all-encompassing that monks never had to worry about survival, despite their inability to cook and do chores; these tasks were simply taken care of by the community.²¹⁴ Evidence of the importance of this support can be seen in what its absence in America has done to Theravada monks, with dozens at least being forced to abandon the monastic lifestyle throughout the early

²¹¹ Daniel Capper, "Dixie Dharma: Inside a Buddhist Temple in the American South," by Jeff Wilson, *Nova Religion: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 17, no. 2 (2013): 105-106, 106.

²¹² Mark M. Miller, "The Buddha Abides in Mississippi," *Southeastern Geographer* 54, no. 2 (2014): 93-95, 94.

²¹³ Robert C Lester, *Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1973, 131.

²¹⁴ Bhante Ujotika Transcript.

2000s in order to support themselves.²¹⁵ On the other hand, temples with large immigrant populations have been better able to maintain these traditional support systems. These temples often allow multiple monks to be supported by a single internal community.²¹⁶ Buddhist communities have historically supported their local monks in a variety of ways, each of which demonstrates the importance of internal community in determining how temples have changed in North Carolina.

Traditional Buddhist communities were deeply involved in their local monasteries due to Theravada's core belief in gaining punna (merit) in order to achieve a better rebirth in the Wheel of Life Cycle, and to eventually achieve nibbana and break free of the cycle entirely.²¹⁷ The best way to gain positive merit, besides committing to the monastic lifestyle, is to support the local monk and monastery through Kathina sponsorship rituals.²¹⁸ These rituals are deeply steeped in historical tradition, as Theravada Buddhists believe that both the timing and ceremonies of these events were dictated by the Buddha himself.²¹⁹ One of the most common means of sponsorship comes in the form of providing the monk with food offerings. According to Bhante Ujotika, this practice was considered an essential part of civic duty in Burma and was a source of support monks were able to take for granted.²²⁰ Will Baunach, who traveled extensively with Bhante Ujotika in Burma, recalled that this practice was the easiest part of traveling with a Theravada

²¹⁵ Christine Kearney, "Burmese monks who fled to U.S. a vanishing breed," Reuters.com, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-myanmar-monks/burmese-monks-who-fled-to-u-s-a-vanishing-breed-idUSTRE64C2BS20100514>, March 14th, 2010.

²¹⁶ Edward R. Canda and Thitiya Phabthong, "Buddhism as a Support System for Southeast Asian Refugees," *Journal of the National Association of Social Workers*, Volume 37, no. 1, (January 1992): 61-68, 63.

²¹⁷ Michael Jerryson, "Theravada Buddhism," in *Encyclopedia of Global Religions*, Sage Publications, 2011.

²¹⁸ Rosa Salter Rodriguez, "Ceremonies Open Temple Monks from Around World Help Dedicate Theravada Buddhist Facility Near Hoagland," *Ft. Wayne Journal - Gazette*, 9 May 2013.

²¹⁹ October 21, 1990 Kathin Ceremony Schedule, Buddhism: Wat Carolina Buddhajakra Vanaram - Wilmington/Bolivia; Theravada - Thailand. Dr. Walter H. Conser Jr. Papers, Folder 13. Randall Library Special Collections.

²²⁰ Bhante Ujotika Transcript.

monk due to the constant supply of free food.²²¹ Southeast Asian communities are so dedicated to this method of gaining merit that many countries, including Burma, have created entire merit-societies whose sole purpose is to support their local monk through various services and food offerings.²²² The offering of food is such a critical part of the merit building process that monks are even forced to abandon their normal vegetarian diets due to the Buddha's insistence that they accept whatever type of food is offered to them.²²³

Food offerings are crucial in allowing Theravada monks to support themselves due to the tradition's strict limitations on the monastic lifestyle. Traditional Theravada monks are expected to sustain themselves on food offerings alone due to their communal role in providing merit opportunities, as well as restrictions against providing services for a personal profit.²²⁴ Timing is even a critical factor in food offering due to traditional restrictions against a Theravada monk eating after noon.²²⁵ If food offerings are not presented in the morning the monk is not allowed to accept them, no matter who offers them.²²⁶ Despite the prominent position of monks in Southeast Asian communities they are completely dependent on the laity when it comes to obtaining food.

There is a great deal of historical precedent and tradition behind the practice of food offerings in both Burma and Thailand, a fact which further highlights the differences present in American Buddhism. Burmese Buddhists have a long tradition of visiting the great Shwedagon Pagoda temple, located in Yangon, Burma, in order to provide food offerings as a part of their

²²¹ Will Baunach, interviewed by Zachary Morgan, June 16, 2019.

²²² Lester, *Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia*, 149.

²²³ Bhante Ujotika Transcript..

²²⁴ Kearney, "Burmese monks who fled to US a vanishing breed."

²²⁵ Usha Welarnatra, *Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1994, xviii.

²²⁶ Asanga Tilakaratne, *Theravada Buddhism: The View of the Elders*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press), 2012, 97.

holiest pilgrimage.²²⁷ Many Thai Buddhist communities still regularly observe wan phra, the weekly Buddha Day, by traveling to their local monasteries in order to present offerings and respects to the monks.²²⁸ For many traditional Southeast Asian monks food offerings in order to gain merit is deeply ingrained, a tradition that has been passed down for generations in the same way Christmas and Easter are passed down in Christian communities.²²⁹ The historical background of food offerings in Theravada culture helps to demonstrate why Southeast Asian immigrants have continued this practice so devotedly and why it has played such a critical role in the development of Wat Carolina and SIMC.

Lastly, Theravada temples have always depended upon financial support from their members. Financial support is usually given in the form of donations in a similar manner to food offerings. Historically this practice has been critical in allowing Theravada temples to become established in North Carolina. Virtually all temples in the state began through some type of donation from an Southeast Asian immigrant. In Southeast Asia monks are forced to rely almost entirely on their internal communities for financial support due to the Ten Sila (Ten Moral Precepts) forbidding them from receiving or owning any money.²³⁰ Again, like the food offerings, this restriction is rarely a problem in traditional Southeast Asian communities which possess a long history of financially supporting monasteries to gain merit.

The various struggles of Wat Carolina and SIMC provide ample evidence that the status of these traditional support systems is perhaps the most important factor in determining how a temple will adapt to North Carolina culture. Further, the differences between the experiences of

²²⁷ The Great Gold Pagoda, UA.29.02.0067, Box 7, Folder 5, James Cannon 3rd Papers, 1912-1974, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Durham, North Carolina, United States, 1.

²²⁸ Cassaniti, *Living Buddhism*, 39.

²²⁹ Vincent Bove Transcript.

²³⁰ "Ten Moral Precepts," In *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*, edited by Helicon, Helicon, 2018.

Wat Carolina and SIMC serve as excellent examples of the importance of large immigrant communities in maintaining a traditional temple culture. In contrast, temples which are able to establish a support as similar as possible to an Southeast Asian internal community have proven the most able to preserve the traditional relationship between Buddhist monks and the laity. Temples which consist of a Western convert internal community have typically been encouraged to make significant changes to this relationship to maintain the support necessary to survive in America.²³¹ Wat Carolina's early access to a large and diverse immigrant community caused its experience in North Carolina to differ from SIMC's from its early days.

“Here we are International:” Wat Carolina's Internal Community

From its very foundation, Wat Carolina possessed strong support both from an extensive immigrant community and the National Sangha of Thailand. One of the temple's chief advantages was that it was for many years the only Theravada temple on the East Coast between Atlanta and Washington D.C.²³² Because of its isolated status, Wat Carolina attracted individuals not just from long distances but also from a variety of Pan-Asian nationalities. Initially Wat Carolina was supported by Thai, Chinese, Laos, Cambodian, Korean, and Japanese immigrants, leading Sunataree to refer to Wat Carolina as an international temple.²³³ The large internal immigrant community allowed Wat Carolina to preserve a traditional East and Southeast Asian community, culture, and teachings. However, the decline of Wat Carolina's immigrant community around the turn of the twenty-first century also clearly demonstrates the historical transition these immigrant organized temples have experienced in North Carolina. Wat

²³¹ Wendy Cage, “Reflections on “Habits,” Buddhism in America, and Religious Individualism,” *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 68, No. 2, (Summer, 2007), 201-205, 202.

²³² Susan Usher, “Buddhists and Well-Wishers Break Ground at Temple Site,” *The Brunswick Beacon*, 6 July 1989.

²³³ Sunataree Hemavong Transcript.

Carolina's position in terms of congregation size and number of attending monks has diminished significantly in recent decades. In North Carolina, this decline has allowed for the ascendance of Western organized temples such as SIMC.

Wat Carolina's connection to the Thai Sangha, as well as its status as a foundational Theravada temple, brought it vital national and international support as it was being established. In the first year Wat Carolina was founded, it was able to hold multiple Kathina and other food offering ceremonies in support of the monastery and monks, something SIMC has rarely been able to achieve once a year.²³⁴ Typical ceremonies consisted of numerous food offerings which provided both visiting and permanent Wat Carolina monks with plenty of nourishment.²³⁵ These offerings were also conducted in the traditional manner one would have seen in Southeast Asia rather than a manner which could be confused with the offerings of an American Protestant church. Rather than placing donations anonymously in a box or plate, offerings were presented directly to the presiding monks by individual practitioners. The center's 1991 Songkran Festival specifically ended by informing participants that their support of the monks and monastery had gained merit on their behalf and on the behalf of their elders and ancestors.²³⁶ This assurance differs greatly from practices at SIMC, where the offering to the temple was presented in a manner which is reminiscent of Protestant churches.

Wat Carolina's internal community was also dependable in providing financial support to the temple during the numerous Kathina ceremonies conducted in the temple's opening decade. The temple's status also attracted support from the international community because of the

²³⁴ Kathin Ceremony Schedules, Buddhism: Wat Carolina Buddhajakra Vanaram - Wilmington/Bolivia; Theravada - Thailand. Dr. Walter H. Conser Jr. Papers, Folder 13. Randall Library Special Collections, 17; Bhante Ujotika Transcript.

²³⁵ Ibid, 18.

²³⁶ Ibid, 19.

involvement of the Thai Buddhist patriarch, the Most Venerable Somdej Phrayansangvara. His involvement in a 1990 Kathina ceremony allowed Wat Carolina to address the rising costs of the temple's construction with support from Buddhists around the world.²³⁷

Locally, Wat Carolina also depended upon support from immigrant businesses and organizations within the community, support which was a fact of life in Thailand.²³⁸ One of Abbot Phrakru's greatest advantages in North Carolina was the number of family members upon whom he could count for financial support. Family support has been vital in the success of many immigrant organized Theravada temples in the state.²³⁹ These crucial internal community support systems ensured that Wat Carolina was not dependent upon their external community or Western converts for support during its difficult early years. This established an early distinction from the development of SIMC, which from its earliest days was dependent on Western support for every aspect of temple life.

Despite the significance of the Kathina ceremonies in providing Wat Carolina with food offerings, one should not be fooled into thinking these have been the only sources of support the temple has been able to rely upon. The large and diverse group of Southeast Asian immigrants who made up Wat Carolina's initial congregation ensured that Abbot Phrakru received daily food offerings and various other means of support, including support beyond scheduled rituals. These immigrants provided the monks of Wat Carolina with a strictly scheduled support system, providing blessed food every day at 10:30 am.²⁴⁰ Important chores and activities which the monks were forbidden from addressing were also handled by this group, such as the mowing of

²³⁷ Ibid, 20.

²³⁸ Cassaniti, *Living Buddhism*, 52.

²³⁹ Jim Copp Transcript, Vandy Chhum, interviewed by Barbara Lau, December 7, 2000.

²⁴⁰ Crystal S. Tatum, "A Day in the Life of the Buddhist Monks at Wat Carolina," *Wilmington Star*, 20 September 2006.

grass and vehicular transportation.²⁴¹ Without this continuous stream of internal support, the monks of Wat Carolina would never have been able to survive their new lives in North Carolina. Further evidence of the importance of this support can be seen with a group of forty Burmese monks who immigrated to America in 2007. Out of the forty, who each immigrated to different parts of the country, thirty-three have abandoned the monastic lifestyle due to their inability to secure a traditional support system.²⁴² The fact that these monks were all localized in New York, a state with urban centers which have a large East Asian population, further emphasizes the difficulties Theravada monks face in adapting to life in America.

However, this extensive support system has declined in recent years due to the diminishing numbers of the original Southeast Asian immigrant population which founded Wat Carolina. Sunataree Hemavong identified the fact that the older generation is no longer able to help support Abbot Phrakru and the monastery as the cause behind Wat Carolina's decline.²⁴³ She claimed that second and third generation immigrants were not picking up the slack as their parents and grandparents aged, causing Abbot Phrakru's support systems to dwindle.²⁴⁴ Evidence of this decline can be seen simply by examining the overall numbers of attendance at the temple. Wat Carolina's numbers have declined in the hundreds even at the largest of the temples events, including major Buddhist holidays. For example, almost a thousand Buddhists from across the Carolinas, Washington state, Virginia, and California attended a Buddhist Lent celebration at Wat Carolina in 1991.²⁴⁵ This was a large congregation typical of Wat Carolina's early years, when regular events could attract upwards of eight hundred participants.²⁴⁶ Most of these

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Poppick, "The Last of the Saffron Monks."

²⁴³ Sunataree Hemawong Transcript.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ "Buddhists to Converge on Bolivia Sunday," *Wilmington Morning Star*, 12 November 1991.

²⁴⁶ Jim Copp Transcript.

numbers came from the large immigrant community which supported the temple. Since the temple was the only Theravada centers within a reasonable distance to many Southeast Asian immigrant communities, it was the only option for many, regardless of their ethnic background.²⁴⁷ Their support system ensured that Wat Carolina would be well supplied with food offerings and financial donations for its monks, providing donations from Southeast Asian communities across the country.²⁴⁸

Sunataree Hemawong strongly believes in the impact the growing decline of immigrant support has had upon the temple, resulting from the aging and dispersal of the original immigrant founders. Abbot Phrakru's family and friends played a pivotal role in providing him with food offerings outside of special events, bringing him food daily in a well-organized system.²⁴⁹ Sunataree informed me that while this responsibility had once been evenly spread among many volunteers, there were now far fewer individuals able and/or willing to participate.²⁵⁰ As she put it: "Before... we have many people come seven days a week to take turns. But now many people, like the ones here (on the day of my interview) who live far away... that used to come in certain times, they cannot come anymore."²⁵¹ Instead of delegating the responsibility to a large number of supporters Sunataree is now forced to shoulder much of the work herself. Sunataree currently brings food to Abbot Phrakru four days out of the week even though she is retired. Her financial burden has increased as well, forcing her to rely on paying for expenses out of pocket rather than receiving donations.²⁵²

²⁴⁷ D.M Shore, "Buddhists Join Other Supporters at Retreat Site," *Wilmington Morning Star*, 3 July 1989.

²⁴⁸ Millard K. Ives, "Building Peace of Mind: Buddhists Patiently Add to Midway Road Complex," *Wilmington Star*.

²⁴⁹ Tracy Rose, "Faithful of Ancient Traditions Search for Peace in New Home," *Wilmington Star*, 20 October 1990.

²⁵⁰ Sunataree Hemawong Transcript.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Ibid.

The aging of Wat Carolina's original immigrant population and the lack of interest of their children was something many practitioners at the temple were quick to blame for its decline. Vincent Bove, a former novice monk at the temple, noted that Wat Carolina has become much more "quiet" in recent years due to the inability of the aging immigrant population to continue making the trip to reach the temple.²⁵³ Sunataree considers the apathy of the younger generation towards Buddhism and their obsessions with modern American technology a universal hinderance to Buddhism.²⁵⁴ These observations differ substantially with other studies on the descendants of Asian immigrants. Various individuals and organizations have argued that many second-generation Asians prefer to follow the religion of their parents in order to preserve ethnic ties as they adjust to American culture.²⁵⁵ The experience of Wat Carolina suggests that this is not always the case with second generation Buddhists in North Carolina. The failure of the second generation to uphold the traditional support system of their parents appears to have significantly contributed to the decline of Wat Carolina as a whole.

The decline of Abbot Phrakru's core internal community has created daily struggles for Wat Carolina, even threatening the monk's daily access to food. Jim Copp recalled that during the early days of the temple, and even more during Abbot Phrakru's time in Thailand, no effort was required to keep the monk fed because multiple individuals would be present every day to address his needs.²⁵⁶ More recently the consistency of this support system has diminished drastically, sometimes forcing Abbot Phrakru to go entire days without eating. In my interview with Jim Copp he recalled an instance where no Thai individuals had shown up to Wat Carolina

²⁵³ Vincent Bove Transcript.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Amy Cooper, "Burmese Americans," In *Gale Encyclopedia of Multicultural America*, edited by Gale, 3rd ed. Gale, 2014; Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut, *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, 242.

²⁵⁶ Jim Copp Transcript.

for the entire day, leaving the Abbot attended by only four “foreigners.”²⁵⁷ All of these “foreigners”, in this case referring to Western converts, had forgotten to bring the Abbot food, resulting in a last-minute scramble that ultimately failed to bring any food before noon. Abbot Phrakru was thus not able to eat that day due to Theravada Buddhism’s restrictions against monks eating in the afternoon.²⁵⁸ Instances such as this are similar to the experiences of Theravada monks, such as the Burmese, who lack both the state and internal community support system that initially made Wat Carolina such a prominent temple.²⁵⁹ The transition which Wat Carolina’s internal community has undergone during its time in North Carolina well represents the experiences of many immigrant organized temples, and perhaps suggests a future in which Western organized temples such as SIMC will have become the norm. It is entirely possible that new methods of supporting monks will have to be developed in order to address the impact of this new norm.

A Tar Heel Sangha: The Internal Community of SIMC

Various practitioners at Wat Carolina noted that the major cause of decline at the temple, besides the aging immigrant population, was the new temples which former monks of the center had established.²⁶⁰ By the early 2000’s the formally diverse community of immigrants which supported Wat Carolina had branched off to form their own temples in order to provide themselves with a meditation center closer to home.²⁶¹ Despite the center’s initial goal of being a teaching temple for future monks, the number of monks present at the temple has declined drastically as they have gone on to seek more prestigious, and better supported, assignments in

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Kearny, “Burmese monks who fled to US a vanishing breed.”

²⁶⁰ Jim Copp Transcript; Vincent Bove Transcript; Sunataree Hemawong Transcript.

²⁶¹ Sunataree Hemawong Transcript.

other areas.²⁶² Theravada Buddhism's spread across the state has increased its visibility to North Carolina communities due to the growing number of temples which have joined Wat Carolina. This spread, combined with the diffusing impact of Southeast Asian immigrant communities in North Carolina Buddhism, has directly resulted in the formation of more Western organized temples such as SIMC.

Burmese Buddhists temples have experienced unique difficulties in establishing themselves due to the dispersed and isolated nature of Burmese immigrants in comparison to other groups. Since the third wave of Burmese immigration to the United States was largely made up of refugees, these immigrants have been relatively few in number and poorly organized.²⁶³ Portions of the country with a higher proportion of Burmese immigrants, such as Texas and New York, have been able to form immigrant-supporting organizations in order to ease the cultural and economic transition of refugees. Unfortunately for North Carolina, its comparatively small Burmese populations, roughly estimated to be between one thousand to two thousand individuals, has not received the same national or international support as cities with more significant urban centers.²⁶⁴ This dispersion makes it even more difficult for Burmese Theravada temples to establish a traditional support system, as both Theravada Buddhism and their own immigrant base is widely spread across the state.

Because of Burmese Buddhism's historically antagonistic relationship to its government, Burmese monks have rarely, if ever, enjoyed the state support their Thai counterparts experience in founding temples in America.²⁶⁵ The resulting isolated existence of many Burmese Buddhists

²⁶² Thomas A. Tweed, *Buddhism and Barbecue: A Guide to Buddhist Temples in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2001, 50; Jim Copp Transcript.

²⁶³ Cooper, "Burmese Americans."

²⁶⁴ "U.S. Census Bureau, 2006-2010 American Community Survey."

²⁶⁵ Poppick, "The Last of the Saffron Monks."

has made it particularly difficult for them to resist the pressures of “Americanization” as they attempted to adapt themselves to their new home.²⁶⁶ Like most Buddhists in North Carolina resisting Americanization has best been done by a dedicated immigrant community.²⁶⁷ However, since immigrant organized temples have spread out so broadly across the state, as well as the fact that the Burmese immigrant population is rather small to begin with, Burmese temples such as SIMC have struggled to form this support system.²⁶⁸ As a result the internal community of SIMC almost entirely consists of Western Americans who have vastly different conceptions of their place in a Buddhist community.

One of the most significant differences between SIMC and the early days of Wat Carolina was its difficulty in establishing a basic support system for Bhante Ujotika. When asked about what the biggest difference was between Buddhism in North Carolina and Burma, Bhante replied that it was the differing conceptions of community generosity.²⁶⁹ Bhante noted that while Buddhist communities in Southeast Asia understand that being generous towards a monk is intended primarily to increase one’s own merit, North Carolina practitioners are apt to believe that he is being selfish in asking for donations without demonstrating his own physical labor.²⁷⁰ Bhante has even felt the need to significantly limit the amount of time he spends teaching on community generosity because “they don’t know I teach for them, not for me. For them and their benefit, their welfare...”.²⁷¹ As a result, he has played a more active role in activities which would normally be reserved for the lay Buddhist community, such as obtaining

²⁶⁶ Cheah, Joseph. "Cultural Identity and Burmese American Buddhists." *Peace Review* 14, no. 4 (2002): 415-419, 417.

²⁶⁷ Ibid, 416.

²⁶⁸ Ibid, 417; Bhante Ujotika Transcript.

²⁶⁹ Bhante Ujotika Transcript.

²⁷⁰ Ibid; Suzanne Pun Transcript.

²⁷¹ Bhante Ujotika Transcript.

food, temple upkeep, and even gardening and small scale landscaping.²⁷² These activities explicitly clash with many of the vows Theravada monks make upon being ordained, demonstrating the importance of community in allowing a monk to thrive.

Like many Western organized temples, food offerings appear to be almost entirely absent at SIMC at regular services. SIMC does not hold any regular Kathina offering ceremonies, only holding these events when prominent monks from outside the area come to visit the center.²⁷³ When Bhante Ujotika first arrived in the Asheville area he was occasionally forced to prepare his own food as there were no Burmese supporters regularly available to assist him.²⁷⁴ The only Burmese supporter whom Bhante was able to rely upon consistently was Suzanne Pun who, like Sunataree, has been forced to take upon herself a disproportionate responsibility in supporting Bhante due to a lack of Western interest.²⁷⁵ I noticed upon my first official visit to SIMC that even the Buddha Day celebration contained no significant food offerings or other forms of donation. In North Carolina, Bhante Ujotika has often found it necessary to do everything himself, a state which differs drastically from his experiences living and teaching Buddhism in Burma.

Suzanne Pun also believed another of Bhante's new practices he had picked up in America further emphasizes the role of a monk's support system in dictating his/her actions. Throughout his time in Asheville, Bhante had been forced to cook, clean, do yard work, and maintain house upkeep. Suzanne Pun mentioned, almost as a side note, that many Western supporters appeared to have been attracted to the temple due to Bhante's readily apparent work

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ "Welcome to Serenity Insight Meditation Center."

²⁷⁴ Bhante Ujotika Transcript.

²⁷⁵ Suzanne Pun Transcript.

ethic and “handiness.”²⁷⁶ Suzanne Pun claimed that it was only after Westerners witnessed Bhante’s hard work in temple upkeep that they began to assist him in chores and construction projects.²⁷⁷ This development is a common experience among Western organized Buddhist temples, with Western followers often preferring individual action over communal support.²⁷⁸ Again, this attitude differs greatly from the historical expectation of support which developed within Southeast Asian communities in Theravada countries.²⁷⁹ The North Carolinian preference towards physically active monks is evidence of the historical transition that Buddhism has undergone in North Carolina as Western influences have begun to replace traditional immigrant communities. While Buddhists in Southeast Asian communities consider it an honor to support their local monk and monastery, monks in North Carolina are persuaded to attract their support through their actions and charismatic personality.²⁸⁰

Wat Carolina and SIMC’s history in North Carolina clearly demonstrates the importance of a monastery’s internal community in determining whether a Theravada monk will be able to maintain a traditional lifestyle. These case studies illuminate the superior ability of a Southeast Asian immigrant community in preserving traditional avenues of support for Theravada Buddhism, evidenced by the experience of Wat Carolina in its early years. Additionally, the experiences of SIMC in the past decade clearly denote the transition which Theravada Buddhism is undergoing as North Carolina temples and their communities become more Western centered. Instead of strictly adhering to traditional Buddhist practices and community expectations,

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Anne C. Spencer, "Diversification in the Buddhist Churches of America: Demographic Trends and their Implications for the Future Study of U.S. Buddhist Groups," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 15, (2014): 35-61.

²⁷⁹ Matthew O’Lemmon, "Merit-Making Activities and the Latent Ideal of the Buddhist Wat in Southwestern Cambodia," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 33, no. 2 (2014): 27-57, 30.

²⁸⁰ "Buddhist laity," In *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*, edited by Helicon, Helicon, 2018.

American Buddhism is being repackaged to better appeal to American audiences.²⁸¹ This historical development is almost entirely a result of the declining immigrant population which initially established Theravada Buddhism in the state at temples like Wat Carolina. Newer temples, such as SIMC, have been pressured to alter their relationship with local communities to secure support from predominately Protestant communities. Naturally this new relationship has encouraged North Carolina monks to also reorient the methods with which they teach the dhamma to their local communities.

“They May Think You Are Strange, but Nothing Bad Happened:” Theravada Buddhism’s Relationship With its External Community in North Carolina

Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century most historians appeared to share Jeff Wilson’s belief, which he expressed in *Dixie Dharma*, that non-Christian religions in the South had been forced to alter their cultures and beliefs in order to blend into conservative communities.²⁸² Wilson argued that various monks had deliberately attempted to Americanize their temples by adopting American political and social issues into their daily practices.²⁸³ These changes included recognizing the supposed unique destiny of the United States in world history, revering the country’s leaders (especially Republican president George W. Bush), and even justifying and supporting military aggression in the Middle East, a clear violation of the Ten Silas traditional monks are expected to follow.²⁸⁴ Wilson identified the relationship between Buddhism and conservative Christianity as the chief regional influence on Buddhism’s development in the South.²⁸⁵ His arguments supported the conclusions of other researchers on

²⁸¹ Amy L. Scott, "Buddhism in America," In *Encyclopedia of American Social Movements*, edited by Immanuel Ness, Routledge Press, 2013.

²⁸² Samuel S. Hill, "Glenn Feldman, Editor. Politics and Religion in the White South. (Religion in the South.), (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), *The American Historical Review* 112 (1), 190-210: 203.

²⁸³ Wilson, *Dixie Dharma*, 23.

²⁸⁴ Ibid; Tilakaratne, *Theravada Buddhism: The View of the Elders*, 65.

²⁸⁵ Wilson, *Dixie Dharma*, 158.

Southern religions who claimed that non-Christian religions were typically forced to remain invisible and inoffensive in order to survive in the South's hostile religious climate.²⁸⁶ Perhaps Wilson's most intriguing claim was the significance he placed on the September 11th terrorist attacks in influencing how American Buddhists behaved in the South.²⁸⁷

In *Dixie Dharma*, Wilson examined a Theravada monk in Mechanicsville, Virginia as evidence that the 9/11 attacks had profoundly influenced how Theravada Buddhists portrayed themselves to Southern communities. This monk had included paraphernalia on his altar memorializing the attacks, as well as signs specifically indicating support for then president George W. Bush.²⁸⁸ This thesis considers whether North Carolina's conservative Christian culture has effectively forced Buddhists to minimize their outward presence as Wilson claimed it had in parts of Virginia.²⁸⁹ In fact, while both Wat Carolina and SIMC did experience some initial wariness or annoyance from their local communities, such as when Bolivia's Antioch Baptist Church shared their concerns over a Buddhist temple in their community, neither group reported anything approaching the significance of the events detailed by Wilson.²⁹⁰ The evidence, as well as oral history subjects, suggests that Buddhism's subdued presence in North Carolina might actually be more the result of long standing traditions than hostility from its external communities.²⁹¹

One of Jeff Wilson's chief observations in *Dixie Dharma* was that Buddhists living in Southern states felt the need to minimize their presence in order to avoid backlash from

²⁸⁶ Edward J. Cashin and Glenn T. Eskew, *Paternalism in a Southern City: Race, Religion, and Gender in Augusta, Georgia*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 145.

²⁸⁷ Wilson, *Dixie Dharma*, 23.

²⁸⁸ Ibid, 22.

²⁸⁹ Ibid, 161.

²⁹⁰ Jennifer Essen, "Nearby Church Wary of Buddhists," *Morning Star*, 20 August, 1988.

²⁹¹ Suzanne Pun Transcript; Will Baunach Transcript; Vincent Bove Transcript; Jim Copp Transcript; Sunataree Hemawong Transcript.

conservative Christian communities.²⁹² Wilson supported this claim by interviewing Virginian Buddhists who shared how they had hidden or minimized their beliefs around coworkers, neighbors, and even family members.²⁹³ However, my research suggests that the historical reason for this subdued presence, and lack of visible evangelism, actually resulted from teachings credited to the Buddha himself. One of the core teachings of the Buddha was the idea that no one, including the Buddha, was capable of saving or enlightening anyone else.²⁹⁴ As the Buddha is believed to have put it: “By oneself is evil done, by oneself is one defiled... Purity and impurity depend on oneself, no one can purify another.”²⁹⁵ The belief in the inability of any Buddhist to save another popularized the belief that every individual would have to accept Buddhism in their own time, discouraging the time conscious evangelism associated with Christianity.²⁹⁶ From its beginnings in East Asia, the bulk of Buddhist teaching, study, practice, and monastic training occurred within the confines of the monastery rather than outside communities.²⁹⁷ Most Theravada Buddhists remain opposed to direct evangelism in the name of loving kindness, arguing that the dhamma should only be presented to those who explicitly ask to learn.²⁹⁸ Nevertheless, Buddhists in Thailand and Burma have actually become more evangelistic in recent decades in an attempt to halt the decline of Buddhism in Southeast Asia caused by the lingering effects of Western nationalism and colonialism.²⁹⁹

²⁹² Wilson, *Dixie Dharma*, 158.

²⁹³ Ibid, 160.

²⁹⁴ Richard F. Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought*, (London; Oakville, CT; Equinox Pub, 2009), 77.

²⁹⁵ Valerie Roebuck, *Edited & Translated: The Dhammapada*, (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 2.

²⁹⁶ Ibid, 78.

²⁹⁷ Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, 2nd ed.(New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, 25.)

²⁹⁸ Meadow and Harris, “Buddhism: Theravada Buddhism”

²⁹⁹ Jerryson, “Theravada Buddhism.”

In short, this historical context suggests that the subdued presence of SIMC and Wat Carolina in their local communities is a continuation of traditional Southeast Asian practices prior to European interference. Bhante Ujotika, for example, copied his lack of evangelicalism directly from his primary Buddhist teacher back in Burma.³⁰⁰ It is in fact likely that Buddhist evangelism resulted from conservative Christian pressures brought upon by imperial missionary work. For example, various scholars have noticed how monastic education and Buddhist involvement in politics became much more pronounced in Burma in the post-colonial period in an attempt to restore a traditional national identity.³⁰¹ In her work “In Defense of the Nation: The Cult of Nang Thoranee in Northeast Thailand” Elisabeth Guthrie how both Cold War communism and anti-communism forced the Thai Sangha to address these issues in order to protect its sovereignty.³⁰² Therefore, it seems clear that both Wat Carolina and SIMC are following the traditional evangelical practices of Buddhism in their respective countries of origin instead of being influenced by post-colonialism. Many of my oral history subjects claimed that this was the goal of their temple, arguing that a lack of evangelicalism in the external communities was a command handed down directly from the Buddha.³⁰³

Also, all of the interview subjects in this project explicitly minimized the significance of negative experiences they had faced in the South, stressing instead the acceptance they had felt in their new homes. While Wat Carolina did experience some initial “wariness” and “shock” from the community in Bolivia, North Carolina there were no documented cases of formal protest or serious harassment.³⁰⁴ The most Jim Copp, one of the original Western founders of Wat

³⁰⁰ Will Baunach Transcript.

³⁰¹ Ian Harris, *Buddhism, Power and Political Order* (Abingdon: Routledge Press, 2010), 15.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Vincent Bove Transcript.

³⁰⁴ Essen “Nearby Church Wary of Buddhists.”

Carolina, could recall in regards to any harassment was that “there were some rednecks that will go take their car out of gear and rattle the mufflers, you know, pretty loud going by the temple. Initially there was a little bit of that, but not much.”³⁰⁵ At SIMC, Suzanne Pun admitted that she and Bhante Ujotika were scared to come to North Carolina because they were told “don’t go to the South, they’ll burn down your place.”³⁰⁶ However, aside from a few curious glances Bhante Ujotika occasionally receives when going out shopping, Pun claimed that they had largely been accepted by the community due to the pleasant interactions Bhante experienced with locals.³⁰⁷ The most significant example of discrimination gleaned from interviews at SIMC was from my discussions with Will Baunach. Will Baunach recalled that the person who initially sold Bhante Ujotika the Mills River land professed an extreme reluctance to do so upon learning a Buddhist center would be built upon the land.³⁰⁸ Fortunately this appears to have been an isolated experience, as Bhante even enlisted help from the local community in assisting him with chores and projects around the center after only being in the area for a short time.³⁰⁹

Bhante Ujotika seemed to have had a positive reception from North Carolinian communities. This is perhaps best evidenced by his experiences in an English Class at Hendersonville First Baptist Church during his first days in North Carolina. Barbara Mang, the teacher of this class, recalled that Bhante immediately became a popular member of the class due to his open curiosity and willingness to share his beliefs with curious parties.³¹⁰ Bhante’s class, as well as other members of Hendersonville First Baptist, including the pastor, even collaborated

³⁰⁵ Jim Copp Transcript.

³⁰⁶ Suzanne Transcript.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Will Baunach Transcript.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ Barbara Mang Transcript.

to throw Bhante his first birthday party since he began the monastic lifestyle.³¹¹ The quality of the relationship formed between Bhante Ujotika and Barbara Mang is perhaps best represented by their mutual desire to become reacquainted throughout the course of my research. During my interview with Barbara Mang I relayed Bhante Ujotika's wish to meet her again, which prompted her to recall to me her attempts to invite Bhante to various weddings and funerals of her family members.³¹² Fortunately, I was able to provide Bhante Ujotika and Barbara Mang with each other's contact information, restoring the relationship between two individuals from different religions who had nevertheless formed a strong bond. While it is difficult to determine yet whether this relationship can serve as a microcosm of the relationship between Christianity and Buddhism in North Carolina, it does suggest that positive and profitable relationships can be formed even in a conservative religious climate.

Finally, while it is unlikely that conservative Christian backlash has impacted Buddhist practice in the South as severely as Jeff Wilson has indicated, I do not dismiss accounts of discrimination entirely. However, I would argue that much of the discrimination Buddhists face in the South is likely prompted by factors beyond religion. For example, the anti-immigration legislation (addressed in Chapter 1) was principally initiated to address racial, not religious, concerns.³¹³ Sociologists such as Elliot Robert Barkan have also noted that the majority of discrimination Asian immigrants have received is due to their race since it is harder to conceal than their cultural traits.³¹⁴ Research conducted by sociologists and historians has frequently

³¹¹ Bhante Ujotika Transcript.

³¹² Barbara Mang Transcript.

³¹³ "Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965," In *Gale Encyclopedia of U.S. Economic History*, edited by Thomas Riggs. 2nd ed., Chicago, Gale, 2015.

³¹⁴ Elliot Robert Barkan, *Immigrants in American History: Arrival, Adaptation, and Integration*, (Santa Barbara,: ABC-CLIO, 2013), 1604.

identified Asian immigrants as one of the most negatively viewed races in America in this past century.³¹⁵ More importantly, these studies suggest this negative bias exists among Asian immigrants who identify as Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, or virtually any other religion.³¹⁶ These beliefs have been echoed by a large number of the members at SIMC, including immigrants and Western converts. While none could recall any instances of religious discrimination, several recalled instances in which Southeast Asian immigrants were confused with Mexican Americans. Therefore, while Buddhists have no doubt experienced discrimination in the South, it is likely that the cause is more related to racial tensions than religious identity.

SIMC practitioner Kasem Mosen also serves as an example of the greater role racial discrimination has played in North Carolina in comparison to religious discrimination. Kasem Mosen is one of the few North Carolina Buddhists who suggests that Buddhists might have been negatively affected by fallout from the 9/11 attacks.³¹⁷ Like most of his fellow practitioners, it likely was not Kasem Mosen's interest in Buddhism that resulted in these experiences. When asked if he thought that Buddhists in North Carolina had experienced any discrimination resulting from 9/11 he replied: "I would imagine so. I'm an Arab American.... In many places, I'm public enemy number one."³¹⁸ This suggests that the discrimination Kasem experienced was primarily linked to his identity as the son of a Palestinian refugee rather than his identity as a Buddhist. In the future, studies on the experiences of Buddhists in Southern states might be benefitted by comparing and contrasting instances of discrimination between immigrant and

³¹⁵ Gurinder Singh Mann, Paul David Numrich, and Raymond Brady Williams, *Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 57.

³¹⁶ Ibid.

³¹⁷ Kasem Mosen Transcript.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

Western Buddhists. This strategy would likely better illuminate whether discrimination against Buddhists in the South is more the result of religious or racial tensions.

In terms of impact on cultural traditions and daily practices, the internal community of a Buddhist temple matters more in North Carolina than the external community. Both Wat Carolina and SIMC appear to interact with their external communities in the same ways their predecessors did in East Asia. This suggests that their presence in the state is a continuation of traditional practices rather than a response to conservative Christian hostility. However, because Theravada monks have historically been extremely dependent on their lay followers in providing their basic needs, the behavior of their temple's population is vital to their survival in North Carolina. The decline of immigrant Buddhist populations in North Carolina has encouraged many monks to alter their practices and behaviors to maintain access to the support they need. Thus, as the following chapter will address in greater detail, many Theravada monks in North Carolina have made the decision to tailor their teachings of the dhamma to appeal Western practitioners. This tailoring has resulted in a transition from immigrant organized temples to Western organized temples like SIMC, which are growing steadily as more and more Westerners are attracted to "authentic" Southeast Asian teachers. This transition has had a profound impact on the way Theravada Buddhism is practiced and experienced in North Carolina in comparison to East Asia; an impact which will serve as the central theme of the final chapter of this project.

Chapter 3

Creating a New Authenticity: The Transformation of Theravada Buddhist Teachings in North Carolina

“I think many people, they see me as a meditation teacher. They don’t see me as a religious teacher, religious man. They don’t see me as... I’m teaching Buddhism, they see me teaching meditation. Meditation is everywhere, many meditation teachers now, most are not Buddhist. That is why they see me as a meditation teacher.”

-Bhante Ujotika Bhivamsa

“I began my meditation practice specifically through the Shambala Centers. And then I sort of matured... and then was sort of seeking more of a Buddhist sort of flavor. I got really into Buddhist..., into the Dharma, and started studying Buddhism specifically, rather than more of the Western self-help type meditation. So the Western self-help meditation was sort of a gateway for me into wanting to discover the roots of meditation, where it came from.”

-Kasem Mosen

What is “Authentic Buddhism” in North Carolina?

The transition of the internal communities of Theravada Buddhist temples such as Wat Carolina and SIMC has caused a noticeable change in the manner in which the dhamma is taught to both groups. Classical Theravada monks such as Bhante Ujotika are keenly aware of the unique goals and preferences Western converts have in regards to Buddhist teachings. With fewer Southeast Asian immigrants to support them Buddhists monks have frequently decided to alter and even omit certain teachings in order to secure support from their new audiences.³¹⁹ America’s religious history has little institutional parallel to Theravada Buddhism to draw upon,

³¹⁹ Bhante Ujotika, interviewed by Zachary Morgan, June 4th, 2019, transcript.

especially in comparison to countries such as Burma and Thailand. In North Carolina this lack of a historical background has often resulted in Theravada Buddhism being absorbed by aspects of American society and culture, taking on its characteristics in order to appeal to its new audience.³²⁰ Fortunately for these teachers, a growing American audience has expressed an interest in “authentic” Buddhist teachings as they become dissatisfied with “self-help” organizations.³²¹ As a result, many entirely Western Buddhist organizations have begun to reach out to Asian immigrant teachers in order to experience a more “culturally authentic” form of Buddhism. This interest has ensured that traditional Theravada teachers in North Carolina continue to have a genuinely interested, if typically misinformed, Western audience.³²² Therefore, it is vital to examine what these new converts seek from Buddhism in order to accurately comprehend the religion’s recent history in North Carolina and how they have shaped it.

One of the major factors in the transformations of Buddhist teachings in North Carolina is the growing influence of Western converts upon them. The number of American-born Theravada Buddhists, particularly non-Asian, has grown significantly in North Carolina in recent years, and in the nation at large. Current predictions estimate that the number of American Buddhists may rise to 4.2 million by 2020, an increase of almost one million from the preceding decade.³²³ This is a trend that is likely to continue in the future as well, evidenced by a 2017 Pew Research

³²⁰ Gary Storhoff, *American Buddhism as a Way of Life* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 3

³²¹ Peter N. Gregory, “Describing the Elephant: Buddhism in America,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 11, no. 2 (2001): 233-263, 1; Kasem Mosen, interviewed by Zachary Morgan, June 7th, 2019, transcript.

³²² Richard Hughes Seager, “Discovering the Dharma: Buddhism in America,” *Historically Speaking* 9, no. 7 (2008): 43-45, 43.

³²³ “An Asian Religion Gains Popularity in the New World: Buddhism in America.” *The Economist (Online)* (2018).

Center Survey which concluded that Buddhism was the most positively received religion by individuals between the ages of 18-29.³²⁴ As the participation of Southeast Asian immigrants in centers such as Wat Carolina and SIMC continues to decline, whether a result of aging or indifference, Western Americans are beginning to fill the void.

However, in many cases, including those at Wat Carolina and SIMC, the growing influence of Western converts in Buddhist temples does not represent a complete break from the Southeast Asian traditions of the past. While it is true that most American Buddhists begin their journeys by attending some type of non-Buddhist self-help/meditation center or by hearing Buddhist teachings from an outside source, converts who desire a more “authentic” Asian experience do not stay at these locations.³²⁵ Western converts often eventually become dissatisfied with American Buddhist teachings and seek out an Asian born teacher or invite an Asian teacher to an already established center.³²⁶ While teachers in these situations are frequently encouraged to modify their teachings to reach their Western audience, a clear example being Bhante Ujotika’s experience at SIMC, this practice still ensures that Western organized temples still have access to the Theravada teachings brought over by Southeast Asian immigrants. Therefore, this chapter will tell a story of interactions between old and new teachings rather than one of total replacement.

The term “authenticity” will have a different meaning in this thesis than it often has in previous American Buddhism studies. Previous scholars, such as Helen Tworkov in her 1991 article “Many is More,” have been accused by their peers of harming American Buddhist studies

³²⁴ “Americans Express Increasingly Warm Feelings Towards Religious Groups,” PEW Research Center.org, (2017) <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/02/15/americans-express-increasingly-warm-feelings-toward-religious-groups/> (accessed September, 2019.)

³²⁵ Jan Willis, ““Yes, We’re Buddhists Too!”, *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 32, no. 1 (2012): 39-43, 40.

³²⁶ Scott A. Mitchell and Natalie E. F. Quli, *Buddhism beyond Borders: New Perspectives on Buddhism in the United States* (Albany: Suny Press, 2016), 47.

by defining what “authentic” American Buddhism looks like for everyone, regardless of their ethnic, socioeconomic, and religious background.³²⁷ Tworkov fell into the common trap of only regarding white Buddhism as an authentic American Buddhism while regarding Asian Buddhism as an entirely foreign concept.³²⁸ In his book *The Politics and Poetics of Authenticity*, Harshana Rambukwella noted that an overly rigid definition of “authenticity” makes some individuals seem unimportant in the narrative of a larger group by erasing the contributions they have made to its development.³²⁹ In the historiography of American Buddhism this approach has resulted in many Buddhists being “defined out of existence,” because of their lack of recognition as real Buddhists.³³⁰

This chapter will instead utilize Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin’s definition of authentic “tradition” as a symbolic construction embodying both continuity and discontinuity from the past.³³¹ Specifically, the traditional dichotomy that exists in scholarship between “traditional” and American Buddhism will be challenged by recognizing that converts at Wat Carolina and SIMC actively sought both tradition and modernity. This conclusion matches the growing belief that “tradition” and “authenticity” are symbolic terms interpreted by a group’s followers, rather than having fixed meaning.³³² “Authenticity” in this chapter refers to the expressed desire of many Buddhist converts to discover the original Southeast Asian expression of Theravada teachings. The search for authenticity has been a clearly observable goal among

³²⁷ Helen Tworkov, “Many is More,” *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, 1 (1991): 4; Diane P. Ames, *The Wider Shin Buddhist Fellowship Newsletter*, Berkley: Wider Shin Buddhist Fellowship (1994).

³²⁸ *Many is More*, 5.

³²⁹ Harshana Rambukwella, *The Politics and Poetics of Authenticity: A Cultural Genealogy of Sinhala Nationalism*, (London: UCL Press, 2018), vii.

³³⁰ Jan Nattier, “Buddhism Comes to Main Street,” *Wilson Quarterly* 21 (2): 72-80, 76.

³³¹ Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin, “Tradition, Genuine Or Spurious.” *The Journal of American Folklore* 97, no. 385 (1984): 273-290, 273.

³³² *Ibid.*

many Theravada Buddhist converts, including those in North Carolina. All the American born Buddhists interviewed for this thesis described finding an “authentic” Southeast Asian teacher as playing a defining factor in persuading them to attend both Wat Carolina and SIMC.³³³ This desire for authenticity further ensures that Western organized temples will continue to have a surprisingly significant connection to their forbears in East Asia. As a result, the debate over what makes Buddhist teachings authentic will be a prominent feature of this chapter.

Frequently used terms in this chapter which must also be defined are “Western” and “American self-help groups.” These organizations should not be confused with the aforementioned group, “Western-organized temples,” which referred to temples which possessed an immigrant monk teacher but are primarily attended by American converts. The groups identified as self-help groups in this chapter are recognized as being distinct due to their lack of a direct connection to Southeast Asian immigrants or teachers.³³⁴ Many Buddhist practitioners at North Carolina temples began their religious journeys at organizations like these, including Kasem Mosen and Will Baunach.³³⁵ Western self-help organizations, even ones which claim to share Theravada Buddhist teachings, have been identified as the groups most likely to contain highly Americanized teachings and philosophies.³³⁶ The fact that so many of the Western converts at Wat Carolina and SIMC began their Buddhist experiences in organizations like these

³³³ Kasem Mosen transcript; Will Baunach, interviewed by Zachary Morgan, June 16th, 2019, transcript; Jim Copp, interviewed by Zachary Morgan, June 22nd, 2019, transcript ; Vincent Bove, interviewed by Zachary Morgan, June 19th, 2019, transcript.

³³⁴ Wendy Cadge, "Gendered Religious Organizations: The Case of Theravada Buddhism in America," *Gender and Society* 18, no. 6 (2004): 777-793, 782.

³³⁵ Will Baunach transcript; Kasem Mosen transcript.

³³⁶ Lindahl, Jared R., Nathan E. Fisher, David J. Cooper, Rochelle K. Rosen, and Willoughby B. Britton. "The Varieties of Contemplative Experience: A Mixed-Methods Study of Meditation-Related Challenges in Western Buddhists." *PLoS One* 12, no. 5 (05, 2017).

emphasizes the fact that American culture has begun to have a growing impact upon Buddhism in North Carolina as a whole.

The transition towards Theravada teachings catering to Western converts has not occurred identically across every temple in North Carolina. Wat Carolina and SIMC once again serve as clear examples of the differences that exist between immigrant-organized and Western-organized temples in their respective teachings. Jim Copp firmly believed that the teachings of Wat Carolina “had not changed, and would not change”, because of Abbot Phrakru’s unwavering devotion to traditional Theravada teachings.³³⁷ Vincent Bove acknowledged that this was likely due to the continued presence of an immigrant community at Wat Carolina which preferred traditional Thai teachings.³³⁸ On the other hand, Bhante Ujotika was quick to point out the various ways he had altered his teachings in order to maintain access to his new Western support system.³³⁹ Clearly the altering of traditional Theravada teachings has occurred less rapidly at temples which have been able to preserve, at least to some degree, their access to a supportive immigrant internal community. These serve as further evidence of the critical role that a temple’s internal community plays in the makeup of its culture and teachings. Lastly, they also serve to increase the likelihood that the historical progression of immigrant organized temples like Wat Carolina to Western organized temples such as SIMC might very well represent the future of Buddhism in North Carolina.

What Are They Looking For?: The Formation of a Distinct American Buddhism

Some of the goals and desires of Americans when encountering Buddhism can be historically observed from the religion’s major introduction in the 1900’s. These attitudes serve

³³⁷ Jim Copp Transcript.

³³⁸ Vincent Bove Transcript.

³³⁹ Bhante Ujotika, interviewed by Zachary Morgan, June 4th, 2019, transcript.

as points of comparison with what Western converts have sought throughout the history of Wat Carolina and SIMC. In his book *The American Encounter with Buddhism*, Thomas Tweed identified many of these common goals. From the 1800's on, Buddhist converts were forced to explain Buddhism in Americanized terms to appease those who viewed the religion as atheistic, nihilistic, and pessimistic.³⁴⁰ As a result, Buddhist teachings were often praised for the psychological benefits practitioners could receive by practicing meditation and emotional control. When Buddhism was first presented to American audiences it was often compared and contrasted to Christian teachings and figures in order to make it more accessible. For example, in the late 1800's many religious magazines, such as an 1898 edition of the *Methodist Review*, and related documents often compared and contrasted the teachings and lifestyles of Christ and the Buddha in order to make Buddhist teachings more relatable.³⁴¹ Some Buddhist groups even began to adopt Christian terminology when referring to their places of worship and leaders. For example, multiple organizations began to refer to their temples as churches and referring to their monks as reverends.³⁴² These connections between Buddhism and American Christianity helped ensure that Western Buddhist converts would possess quite different goals and expectations from the Buddhist experience than Southeast Asian immigrants.

The main aspect of American Buddhism identified by Tweed, at least in relation to American born converts, was a desire for the practical application of Buddhist teachings in daily life. Most teachers on Buddhism in America at the turn of the twentieth century, such as the prominent American theologian James Freeman Clarke, emphasized the importance of the moral

³⁴⁰ Thomas A. Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism: 1844-1912 ; Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), xx.

³⁴¹ Ibid, 33; Wesley Johnson, "Christ and Buddha: Resemblances and Contrasts," *Methodist Review* 80 (January-February 1898): 32-40.

³⁴² Ibid, 37.

teachings of the Buddha in minimizing an individual's personal suffering.³⁴³ The majority of Buddhist converts at this time identified themselves as "rational Buddhists," preferring to focus on anthropological and ethical issues rather than the more esoteric beliefs of traditional Theravada Buddhism.³⁴⁴ They were typically more concerned with improving their daily emotional and moral well-being than in securing a better rebirth in their next lifetime on Earth. This preference has remained popular throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and is prevalent among North Carolina converts. Many of the Western attendees of Wat Carolina and SIMC have expressed the desire to find peace in their own lives as their primary attraction to Buddhism.³⁴⁵ For example, Kasem cited that fact that "there was a peace, and there was an equanimity that was being developed through my meditation practice," as his chief motivation in studying Buddhism under Bhante Ujotika.³⁴⁶

Despite its clear preference towards practical and ethical teachings, Victorian-era American Buddhism did not represent a complete break from its Asian past. According to Tweed, this continuation was largely due to a group of individuals he referred to as "romantic" Buddhists. Romantic Buddhists were American converts who were interested in the "Buddhist culture" beyond religion, being primarily drawn to Buddhist art, architecture, customs, and language.³⁴⁷ Instead of attempting to alter Buddhist teachings to suit their preconceived worldview, Romantic Buddhists were typically drawn to the cultures of Buddhist countries such as Japan and Tibet.³⁴⁸ Romantic Buddhists differed from rational Buddhists primarily in their

³⁴³ Ibid, 17.

³⁴⁴ Ibid, 61.

³⁴⁵ Serenity Insight Meditation Center, *Welcome to Serenity Insight Meditation Center (SIMC)* (Asheville, NC: Serenity Insight Meditation Center, 2010).

³⁴⁶ Kasem Mosen Transcript.

³⁴⁷ Tweed, *The American Encounter With Buddhism*, 69.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

more positive reception of the esoteric teachings of traditional Buddhism. Even if it was only to preserve the trappings of a culture which fascinated them, romantic Buddhists such as Ernest Fenollosa and William Sturgis Bigelow played crucial roles in literary, artistic, and philosophical aspects of Southeast Asian Buddhism.³⁴⁹ Because of their actions, American Buddhism in the coming decades would be defined by those who sought to satisfy their curiosity of an alien culture, as well as those who wished to utilize the philosophy to address their own practical needs.

Elements of rationalism as well as romanticism can be seen among the Western converts of SIMC and Wat Carolina. For example, Vincent Bove, a former novice monk at Wat Carolina, identified a prior fascination with the Buddhist philosophy and martial arts he had seen in movies as a key factor in motivating him to first attend Wat Carolina. Like the Romantics described by Tweed in the Victorian era, Bove was initially attracted to aspects of Asian culture which were not directly related to the tenets of Buddhism. However, he was also quick to stress his growing appreciation of Theravada Buddhist teachings in addressing the inevitable sufferings of being human.³⁵⁰ This fascination suggests that Vincent Bove was initially drawn to Wat Carolina by a Romantic attraction to the culture of Buddhist countries, but eventually stayed due to the tangible benefits he believed he had received from the monastic lifestyle. Western members of SIMC also shared desires and experiences like Vincent Bove, demonstrating the widespread effects of Romantic Buddhism. For example, Kasem Mosen was pragmatic to the point of stating that he viewed Theravada Buddhism as a beneficial philosophy rather than a religion. Despite this,

³⁴⁹ Ibid, 72-73.

³⁵⁰ Vincent Bove Transcript.

Kasem was extremely vocal in expressing his desire to find what he viewed as an “authentic” Southeast Asian Buddhist teacher.³⁵¹

The Insight Meditation Society and the Popularity of Self-Help Theravada Buddhism

Most Theravada Buddhist converts in North Carolina appear to share a common experience of transitioning from a Western meditation center to Southeast Asian teachers such as Bhante Ujotika and Abbot Phrakru. These Western centers typically have no ties to Asian immigrant groups and lack the presence of an Asian immigrant monk.³⁵² This transition demonstrates a clear background in Western ideas of meditation and philosophy as well as a curiosity towards East Asian culture. For instance, Louis Stein of Asheville credited his initial Western Buddhist community with encouraging him to study Buddhist philosophies, teachings, and practices. Nevertheless, he also cited this group’s lack of a Buddhist teacher with traditional values as the chief factor in encouraging him to begin attending SIMC with Bhante Ujotika.³⁵³ Like many North Carolina converts, while Louis Stein’s behavior demonstrated a clear desire to maintain a connection with traditional Southeast Asian Buddhist teachings, his efforts would nonetheless be characterized by his background in Americanized philosophy.

The Insight Meditation Society (IMS) of Barre, Massachusetts, the first organization to bring Theravada Buddhism to America on a large scale, were crucial in establishing a preference for Westernized meditation practices . Founded by Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg, and Jack Kornfield in 1975, IMS was immediately characterized by many unique aspects which would later come to define the American Theravada Buddhist experience for many practitioners. For

³⁵¹ Kasem Mosen Transcript.

³⁵² Smith, Buster G. "Buddhism in America: An Analysis of Social Receptivity." *Contemporary Buddhism* 7 2006 (2): 149-164, 150.

³⁵³ “Welcome to Serenity Insight Meditation Center.”

example, although the IMS was founded as a Theravada center, it has frequently hosted teachers from the Tibetan and Zen traditions as well.³⁵⁴ These teachers have included His Holiness the Sixteenth Dali Lama of Tibet and the Venerable Ku San of Korea.³⁵⁵ As a result, Theravada Buddhism in America was immediately distinguished by a blending of Buddhist traditions which have been much less likely to occur in Thailand or Burma. While many Western converts such as Will Baunach immediately viewed cross cultural teachings as a positive development of American Buddhism, other North Carolinian Buddhists quickly expressed a desire to find a center which kept distinct Theravada teachings “alive and well.”³⁵⁶

IMS also quickly set the precedent of valuing meditation practice at the expense of other Theravada teachings and philosophies. The stated purpose of IMS has always been to make itself available to “anybody who is interested in learning anything about meditation for any reason, whether to relieve stress in their lives or whether they’re seeking a spiritual path.”³⁵⁷ IMS attendees, such as acupuncturist Howard Evans and hospital stress reduction expert Jon Kabat-Zinn, have credited the meditation taught at IMS with enhancing the success of their professional lives as well.³⁵⁸ The emphasis this goal places on stress relief and individual benefits clearly represents a continuation of the practicality emphasized by Tweed in *The American Encounter With Buddhism*. Theravada Buddhist converts in North Carolina, such as Ferris Fakhoury and Pam Perkins of SIMC, frequently share this preference towards meditation which is practically beneficial to the extent that they see Asian teachers, such as Bhante Ujotika, are valued as

³⁵⁴ “IMS History, Reflections,” Dharma.org, <https://www.dharma.org/about-us/ims-turns-40/>, (accessed September, 2019.)

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ “Welcome to Serenity Insight Meditation Center.”

³⁵⁷ Nancy Sheehan “Seek ... and You Shall Find ; Insight Meditation Society in Barre has been Offering Refuge from Hectic World for almost 30 Years: ALL Edition,” *Telegram & Gazette*, 23 July 2004.

³⁵⁸ Bradford L. Miner, “Meditation in Barre ; Society Marks 30 Years of Insight for Visitors: RT. 9 WEST Edition,” *Telegram & Gazette*, 10 July 2006.

meditation teachers above all else.³⁵⁹ Bhante Ujotika has even claimed that many of his followers “see me as a meditation teacher, they don’t see me as a religious teacher, religious man” due to the overwhelming popularity of meditation practice.³⁶⁰

Finally, IMS also made American Theravada Buddhism distinct by encouraging American born converts to take leading roles in teaching the dhamma and leading meditation retreats. Recently IMS has begun a new teacher training program in order to increase the number of teachers and monks in the organization who identify as people of color.³⁶¹ While this initiative is a positive response to the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic make up of America, individuals who lack a significant background in Theravada Buddhism have begun to take significant teaching roles in temples across the country . Obviously, their ethnicity does not mean that these teachers were overly flashy, hip, or less genuine than their Asian counterparts, as some writers such as Charles Prebish have been accused of implying.³⁶² However, it does suggest that these teachers might be more influenced by American culture than classically trained Theravada monks such as Bhante Ujotika and Abbot Phrakru. Religious Studies scholars have recognized that Theravada teachers such as the ones at IMS are the most likely to boil Buddhist teachings down to the practice of meditation and short term experiences of enlightenment.³⁶³ In much the same way Western converts reacted to the blending of Buddhist teaching in America, North Carolina practitioners have been roughly split between those who value this diversity and those who seek

³⁵⁹ Bhante Ujotika Transcript; “Welcome to Serenity Insight Meditation Center.”

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ “Diversity and Inclusion, Major Initiatives,” Dharma.org, <https://www.dharma.org/about-us/diversity-and-inclusion/>, (accessed September, 2019).

³⁶² David W. Machacek, "Immigrant Buddhism in America: A Model of Religious Change." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 5, no. 1 (2001): 64-84, 65.

³⁶³ Charles B. Jones, “Marketing Buddhism in the United States of America: Elite Buddhism and the Formation of Religious Pluralism,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, no. 1 (January 2007): 214-221, 218.

a more “authentic” Asian experience. For instance, Kasem Mosen stated that he would “always like to see, you know, a little more diversity” at SIMC, while also displaying a clear desire to go “back to the Southeast Asian tradition, the true tradition, the roots” by finding a Southeast Asian teacher.³⁶⁴

Due to the precedent established by IMS Western self-help Theravada Buddhism became a more prominent expression of the tradition throughout the country. After the IMS movement had become widely recognized in the 1980s a staggering number of Theravada Buddhist books were published by “lay teachers” (teachers with little to no official connection to a Buddhist temple) in the following decades.³⁶⁵ These books popularized Americanized Buddhist philosophies such as following the Pancasila for short-term benefits, as well as promoting virtue in order to achieve personal happiness in the moment, among the growing number of Western organized meditation centers.³⁶⁶ In fact, a survey conducted by Religious Studies historian Charles B. Jones found that out of 91 Buddhist texts published after 1965, roughly one third were solely concerned with self-help and meditation practice at the expense of doctrine and history.³⁶⁷ American magazines such as *Tricycle* in the 1990s even began to market Buddhism to Americans by connecting it to aspects of popular culture and life such as baseball, movies, and even organ donation.³⁶⁸ The editor of the 1993 issue even argued that the equal number of stitches on a baseball and beads on a Buddhist rosary signified an intriguing connection between Buddhism and American baseball.³⁶⁹

³⁶⁴ Kasem Mosen Transcript.

³⁶⁵ Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann, *Westward Dharma: Buddhism beyond Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 293.

³⁶⁶ Ibid, 296,298.

³⁶⁷ “Marketing Buddhism in the United States of America,” 217

³⁶⁸ *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, (Summer, 1993).

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

Throughout the late 20th and early 21st century, Americanized self-help Buddhism continued to be one of the most popular, and therefore most influential, expressions of Buddhism in the country. As of 2011, out of approximately three million self-identified Buddhists in America, 1.3 million had been identified as Euro-American converts who primarily concerned themselves with meditation practice and practical knowledge.³⁷⁰ Even the “old-line” Asian immigrant Buddhist communities recognized a necessity to increase the amount of English language Americanized teachings in order to retain a growing number of potential American converts.³⁷¹ The large numbers and growing influence of Western American Buddhist converts ensured that Americanized Buddhism would have a powerful degree of influence on new Buddhist temples, including those in North Carolina. The substantial number of converts at Wat Carolina and SIMC who began their Buddhist experience at self-help centers serves as clear evidence on the role this movement has played in Theravada Buddhism’s history in North Carolina.

The Surprising Impact of Self-Help Buddhism at Wat Carolina

Again, while the influence of teaching and teachers geared towards Western converts has grown across the entire state of North Carolina, it has not done so at an equal pace in every region. Wat Carolina has been able to preserve traditional teachings more successfully than other temples across the state. The temple largely owes this success to its still large, though again, immigrant population and continued access to international Thai support. Rather than contradicting the growing influence of Western converts in Buddhist teachings, this preservation

³⁷⁰ Kenneth K. Tanaka, “Dramatic Growth of American Buddhism: An Overview,” DharmaWorld.org, https://rk-world.org/dharmaworld/dw_2011julyseptdramaticgrowth.aspx, (accessed September, 2019).

³⁷¹ Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka, *The Faces of Buddhism in America* (California: University of California Press, 1999), 161.

instead reinforces the importance of a temple's internal communities in dictating the rate of change it experiences. Even so, evidence can still be found of the impact Western self-help teachings are having upon Theravada Buddhism. Key examples of this evidence can be seen in the way the temple portrays itself to the local community, and in its interactions with new visitors to the center. At the very least Wat Carolina shares the common experience of attracting potential Western converts whose understanding of Buddhism has been defined by the teachings of Western self-help centers. While many of the older members of the temple, such as Jim Copp, have done a better job of challenging the idea that "there is no right or wrong in Buddhism," this issue is still prevalent enough to force a direct response from Wat Carolina members.³⁷²

Although Wat Carolina has been able to maintain a sizeable immigrant population for much of its history, it has also attracted curious Westerners who bring their own perspectives and beliefs to the temple. This attraction has occurred since the temple was first founded, with neighboring Christian church members visiting the temple as early as 1988.³⁷³ Many of these individuals, such as Mike Voorheis, who visited the temple with his family in 2011, outright rejected the Theravada teachings on the afterlife and rebirth. Like other Buddhists influenced by the teachings of IMS, Wat Carolina's Western visitors tend to gravitate towards teachings on generosity, morality, and loving kindness.³⁷⁴ Another common characteristic of these converts is their belief in the compatibility of Buddhists teachings with those from other religions. For example, long standing Wat Carolina attendee Eric Bruton considered himself a follower of Buddhism, Christianity, and Judaism throughout his time at the temple in the early 2000s.³⁷⁵ This

³⁷² Jim Copp Transcript.

³⁷³ Jennifer Essen, "Bolivia church learns about Buddhist faith," *Wilmington Morning Star News*, 28 August 1988.

³⁷⁴ Mike Voorheis, "I,40 – Learning Life Lessons at Buddhist monastery," *Wilmington Star News*, 5 February 2011.

³⁷⁵ Ben Steelman, "The Path of Simplicity," *Sunday Star News*, 30 April 2000.

multi-layered religious identity ensured that his interpretation of Theravada Buddhism would share many commonalities with other religious beliefs.

However, it is not just the growing number of Americanized Buddhist teachings and converts that has caused self-help Buddhist philosophy to have a growing impact on the development of Wat Carolina. Research has shown that many of the most inquisitive Buddhist practitioners are often Western converts who lack a traditional Buddhist background. On the other hand, many South Asian immigrants have been accused of following Buddhism out of habit due to their family's/country's long history with the tradition.³⁷⁶ For instance, various attendees at both Wat Carolina and SIMC noted that Southeast Asian Buddhists are often only seen at their services during prominent Buddhist holidays.³⁷⁷ At the same time, Jim Copp and Vincent Bove were both quick to argue that Western converts were often more active in their Buddhist faith than immigrants raised in the tradition.³⁷⁸ This suggests that the input of Western converts on the teachings at Wat Carolina will continue to become more prevalent as the popularity of Buddhism continues to grow in the state.

While most members of Wat Carolina claim that Western influence has had a less noticeable impact upon the temples teachings, something which is largely credited to the personality and beliefs of Abbot Phrakru, it has still altered how the temple presents itself to the surrounding community. Examples of this development can be seen clearly in the personal interactions immigrant practitioners have with individual visitors. For example, Sunataree Hemawong regularly avoids sharing Theravada teachings on rebirth and past lives with visitors,

³⁷⁶ Anne C. Spencer, "Diversification in the Buddhist Churches of America: Demographic Trends and their Implications for the Future Study of U.S. Buddhist Groups." *Journal of Global Buddhism* 15, (2015): 35-61, 37; Bhante Ujotika Transcript.

³⁷⁷ Bhante Ujotika Transcript; Vincent Bove Transcript; Jim Copp Transcript; Suzanne Pun Transcript.

³⁷⁸ Vincent Bove Transcript; Jim Copp Transcript.

even potential converts, of the temple. She often avoids sharing these teachings with even the descendants of Thai immigrants, preferring instead to limit them to the original founding Thai immigrants.³⁷⁹ Sunataree likely recognized that most second and third generation Asian immigrants are typically more immersed in American culture than their parents, making them more susceptible to Western cultural influences.³⁸⁰ It is quite possible that the more esoteric teachings of Theravada Buddhism could become neglected in Wat Carolina as second generation immigrants and Western converts began to replace the original immigrants in the temple's leadership roles.

A recognition of North Carolinian interpretations of Buddhism has also played a key role in the development of the limited amount of advertising Wat Carolina conducts. When asked about the purpose of the temple Phra Roberto, a monk who lived at the temple in 2006, replied: "mindfulness, awareness, meditation. To live in the present moment."³⁸¹ An article in the *Wilmington Star* listed "Loving Kindness Meditation" as the answer to what occurred during the Sunday services at Wat Carolina. This presentation neglected the traditional dhamma talks and teachings which Abbot Phrakru regularly presented, something he personally prioritized over the practice of meditation.³⁸² Thus, although the continued presence of an Southeast Asian internal community has allowed traditional Theravada teachings to remain prominent at Wat Carolina, the changes the temple has made in their individual and community interactions demonstrates that Western influences have begun to make an impact in how the temple presents itself.

³⁷⁹ Sunataree Hemawong Transcript.

³⁸⁰ John Dart, "Generation Gap seen among U.S. Buddhists," *Los Angeles Times*, 1995.

³⁸¹ Crystal S. Tatum, "A Day in the Life of the Buddhist Monks at Wat Carolina," *Wilmington Star*, September 20, 2006.

³⁸² Kristin Boyle, "Buddhists Invite you for a Peaceful Visit," *Wilmington Star News*, 18 September 2005; Jim Copp Transcript.

Temples which rely more heavily on Western support have proven less capable of preserving Southeast Asian traditions and practices.

“They See Me as a Meditation Teacher:” The Influence of Self-Help Ideology at SIMC

Based upon documented evidence and the testimony of its members, SIMC has been transformed to a much greater degree by American culture than Wat Carolina. This transformation once again demonstrates the critical role of a temple’s internal community in dictating the nature of its teachings. Many SIMC members, including Luis Stein, Will Baunach, Ferris Fakhoury, and Kasem Mosen began their journeys into Buddhism at a center run entirely by Western converts.³⁸³ However, the attitudes and desires of these converts also demonstrate that the Buddhist romanticism described by Tweed is still very much present in North Carolina Buddhism. Many SIMC members, such as Will Baunach, were very frank in critiquing the lack of “authenticity” they had experienced in the self-help centers before they met Bhante.³⁸⁴ Western converts at SIMC are essentially positioned between the Buddhism of the past and the Buddhism of the future. Like most romantic Buddhists they wish to retain some perceived link to the “authentic” past of Buddhism, but at the same time encourage traditional Southeast Asian monks to Americanize their teachings. For example, although Will Baunach left a Western led Buddhist center in Asheville because he was “souring” on its lack of Southeast Asian culture, he has also been explicit in his “to push Bhante” towards altering his traditional Theravada teachings.³⁸⁵

Perhaps the most obvious evidence of the impact self-help Buddhism has made in North Carolina is the prevalence of groups such as the Asheville Insight Meditation Center (AIM).

³⁸³ “Welcome to Serenity Insight Meditation Center”; Kasem Mosen Transcript.

³⁸⁴ “Welcome to Serenity Insight Meditation Center.”

³⁸⁵ Will Baunach Transcript.”

AIM is an Asheville-based meditation group led by teacher Ronya Banks which markets itself as a “community of diverse and unique individuals” engaging in classical and modern Buddhist teachings.³⁸⁶ AIM has had a profound impact on the culture and teachings of SIMC due to the various members of SIMS who first encountered a blended form of Theravada Buddhism there.³⁸⁷ The relationship between AIM and SIMC represents the progression many Western converts undertake as they grow in their knowledge of Theravada Buddhism in North Carolina. AIM is a particularly representative case study because it clearly possesses many of the Americanized philosophies of Tweed and IMS, while also demonstrating a clear desire to connect itself to portions of the classical dhamma. Examining the relationship between SIMC and AIM demonstrates the pervasiveness of both self-help ideology and romanticism in North Carolina Theravada Buddhism.

Throughout its history in Asheville AIM has always been very open about its desire to present Theravada Buddhism in a manner which is largely independent of Southeast Asian tradition and philosophy. On its website, AIM offers a dogma-free meditation centered Theravada experience.³⁸⁸ This decision ensured that many of the individuals who would later join SIMC would be likely be open to the idea of blending other Buddhist traditions with traditional Theravada teachings. Teachings on the suttas are also largely absent at AIM despite their status as the traditional backbone of the Theravada dhamma.³⁸⁹ Neglecting to recognize the suttas as the unquestioned preserved teachings of the Buddhas is recognized as one of the

³⁸⁶ “About Asheville Insight Meditation, Who We Are,” AshevilleMeditation.com, <https://www.ashevillemeditation.com/about-asheville-insight-meditation>, (accessed September, 2019.)

³⁸⁷ Will Baunach Transcript.

³⁸⁸ “About Asheville Insight Meditation, What We Offer,” AshevilleMeditation.com, <https://www.ashevillemeditation.com/about-asheville-insight-meditation>, (accessed September, 2019.)

³⁸⁹ Daniel Veidlinger, *Sutta (Pāli/Theravada Canon)*, Oxford University Press, 2010.

defining characteristics of modern global Buddhist philosophy.³⁹⁰ Ronya Banks instead prefers to focus on teachings related to awareness, emotional control, mindfulness, and practical meditation practice as evidenced by the numerous articles she has written on this subject for her Sangha.³⁹¹ Clearly the teachings and philosophies produced by Ronya Banks and her fellow converts gravitate towards modern Buddhist teachings at the expense of the classical.

Despite this apparent preference, AIM has also made numerous decisions which suggest a romantic desire to maintain some connections with traditional Southeast Asian Buddhism. The most relevant example of this is the obvious pride Ronya Banks has shown in the classical Theravada training she received from Bhante Ujotika.³⁹² Bhante's influence on AIM has even been able to manifest itself in the center's otherwise Americanized teachings and talks. On at least one instance, specifically on November 3rd 2011, Bhante Ujotika was invited to lead a Buddha Dharma Exploration Class for the AIM Sangha. In the advertisement penned by Banks, Bhante Ujotika was specifically referred to as "an authentic Buddhist Theravada monk."³⁹³ By engaging in the romantic desire to preserve selected portions of an "authentic" Buddhist experience, self-help groups like AIM have made it possible for Southeast Asian monks to maintain a level of influence in Western Sanghas. This influence has resulted in a desire among Western converts to seek out teachings which appeal to their desire for practical knowledge and applications, as well as their desire for a romantic "authentic" Buddhist experience.³⁹⁴

³⁹⁰ Jonathan S. Walters, "Suttas as History: Four Approaches to the "Sermon on the Noble Quest" (Ariyapariyesanasutta)." *History of Religions* 38, no. 3 (1999): 247-284, 250.

³⁹¹ "Talks, Articles," AshevilleMeditation.com, <https://www.ashevillemeditation.com/dharma-articles>, (accessed September, 2019).

³⁹² "About Ronya Banks," MeditationRemedy.com, <http://mindfulnessremedy.com/about-ronya-banks>, (accessed September, 2019.)

³⁹³ Ronya Banks, "Buddha Dharma Exploration Classes," Meetup.com, <https://www.meetup.com/Asheville-Meditation-Meetup-Group/events/dvxjbcypfbfb/>, (accessed September, 2019).

³⁹⁴ Mitchell and Quli, *Buddhism Beyond Borders*, 114

The desire for an authentic Buddhist experience ultimately encouraged many members in groups similar to AIM, such as Louis Stein, Will Baunach, and Kasem Mosen, to leave in order to pursue an “authentic” Southeast Asian Theravada teacher.³⁹⁵ This transition is part of a widespread Western desire to blend tradition and modernity by preserving selected aspects of traditional Theravada Buddhism, especially the culture.³⁹⁶ As a result, many of the Western converts at centers such as SIMC profess a desire to preserve authentic Theravada Buddhism on their own terms. For instance, Will Baunach simultaneously celebrates Bhante Ujotika for being “this incredible resource with regard to the suttas,” while also pressuring him to blend his dhamma talks with other traditions as long as “they have the concept of skillful means”.³⁹⁷ This dualistic goal is likely the common practice of Western self-help centers, such as AIM, showing a preference towards Theravada traditions rather than an exclusive focus.³⁹⁸ While Theravada monks such as Bhante Ujotika have attempted to clear up this confusion, the influence of self-help Buddhism has resulted in a dhamma which has been altered to suit the culture and desires of North Carolina.

“They Feel Restricted:” The Application of Buddhist Teachings in North Carolina

The influence of Western self-help culture has left some easily identifiable marks upon the practice and teaching of Theravada Buddhism in North Carolina. At Wat Carolina, this predominately manifests as an aversion against becoming contaminated by Western cultures as much as is reasonably possible.³⁹⁹ SIMC has experienced a much more profound transformation of its dhamma teachings due to Bhante Ujotika’s conscious decision to “give favor to

³⁹⁵ “Welcome to Serenity Insight Meditation Center,” Kasem Mosen Transcript.

³⁹⁶ Andrew Skilton, “Theravāda,” In *Blackwell Companions to Philosophy: A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, edited by Steven M. Emmanuel, Wiley, 2014.

³⁹⁷ “Welcome to Serenity Insight Meditation Center”; Will Baunach Transcript.

³⁹⁸ “What We Offer,” AshevilleMeditation.com.

³⁹⁹ Jim Copp Transcript.

Americans.”⁴⁰⁰ Despite these differences, members of both Sanghas have described a similar alteration of Theravada teachings which are popular among Western converts. As a result, both the practice and priorities present in many essential Theravada teachings differ drastically from their Thai and Burmese incarnations. Nearly all of these changes, in both Wat Carolina and SIMC, stem from what Thomas Tweed identified as the Western preference for practical applications over esoteric theology.⁴⁰¹

While this thesis has previously alluded to the place meditation teachings hold in North Carolina, it has not yet illustrated how complete of a departure this has been from Thai and Burmese Buddhism. In classical Theravada Buddhism, the Buddha’s sermons on meditation practice are recorded in the Sutta Pitaka (Sutra/Sayings Basket), the portion of the Tipitaka which continues his more practical teachings.⁴⁰² Most Southeast Asian monks consider this basket of teachings to rank second in terms of importance, including Bhante Ujotika and Abbot Phrakru. For traditional monks, the most important branch of Buddhist teachings is the Abhidhamma Pitaka, which literally translates to “Higher Dharma.” The Abhidhamma Pitaka deals with esoteric teachings on nature, natural phenomena, and the laws of life and matter.⁴⁰³ In short, these are the exact teachings which have been discouraged in American culture due to the influence of the Victorian era, IMS, secularism, and rationalism.

When Bhante Ujotika received his traditional Theravada training in Burma, he was taught that the Abhidhamma Pitaka was a crucial element of the Pali Canon due to its role in providing meaning to the other sections of the Tripitaka. To this day Bhante Ujotika believes that “without

⁴⁰⁰ Bhante Ujotika Transcript.

⁴⁰¹ Tweed, *The American Encounter With Buddhism*, 91.

⁴⁰² John Walsh, "Tripitaka." In *World History: A Comprehensive Reference Set*, edited by Facts on File. Facts On File, 2016.

⁴⁰³ "Abhidhamma Pitaka," In *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia*, by Encyclopedia Britannica, Britannica Digital Learning, 2017.

understanding that (the Abhidhamma Pitaka), they cannot understand other teachings,” including proper meditation practice. Because Bhante Ujotika is aware that “most of them (his Sangha) don’t understand that,” he has chosen to begin with meditation practice until his followers are ready for the Higher Dharma.⁴⁰⁴ Wat Carolina shares a similar outlook, with even its most basic teaching materials providing all three sections of the Tipitaka equal attention and description.⁴⁰⁵ Despite this inclusion, immigrant members of Wat Carolina have admitted that sharing the teachings in the Abhidhamma Pitaka with Western visitors often causes them to “talk about them and say they are crazy.” This difficulty directly resulted in the temple’s decision to largely market itself as a meditation and teaching center.⁴⁰⁶ Despite the clearly evident attempts of North Carolina Buddhists to retain a measure of “authentic” Theravada teachings, the inversion of the Tipitaka ensured that the interpretations they reached would differ greatly from classical Buddhism.

One of the most commonly neglected teachings from the Abhidhamma Pitaka in North Carolina is the explanation of the thirty-one realms one can be born into during their kamma cycle. It is almost universally accepted in traditional Theravada countries such as Burma and Thailand that the merit one accumulates in their life will cause them to be born into a better or worse realm when they die.⁴⁰⁷ Understanding the kamma cycle is considered a crucial element of Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhism, since breaking free from this cycle is believed to be the only way to achieve nibbana.⁴⁰⁸ However, in North Carolina belief in the Bhavacakra has yet to

⁴⁰⁴ Bhante Ujotika Transcript.

⁴⁰⁵ Phrakru Buddamonpricha, *Buddhism*, Bolivia, North Carolina: Wat Carolina Buddhajakra Vanaram.

⁴⁰⁶ Sunataree Hemawong Transcript.

⁴⁰⁷ Daniel C. Maguire, *Sacred Rights: the Case for Contraception and Abortion in World Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 147; Niklas Foxeus, ““I Am the Buddha, the Buddha is Me”: Concentration Meditation and Esoteric Modern Buddhism in Burma/Myanmar.” *Numen* 63, no. 4 (2016): 411-445, 416.

⁴⁰⁸ Venerable Dr. Saddhatissa, *An Introduction to Buddhism* (London, United Kingdom: Buddhapadipa Temple), 19

achieve widespread appeal among Western converts. Both Wat Carolina and SIMC have largely refrained from sharing these teachings with Western converts out of fear of confusing or even offending them. The fact that Wat Carolina and SIMC have experienced such similar pressures in regard to these teachings, despite their differing demographics, clearly represents the neglect Westerners based in self-help ideology have felt towards teachings on the Bhavacakra. Western converts such as Will Baunach claim that this neglect is caused by a lack of recognition, which he shares with other members of SIMC, as to how these teachings “are relevant to our day to day life.”⁴⁰⁹

At Wat Carolina, rebirth is primarily taught among the original Thai immigrants who founded the temple. The impacts of this decision can be seen in the interactions Wat Carolina has had with the community-at-large throughout its history in Bolivia. For example, the subjects of kamma, rebirth, and the thirty-one realms were not brought up in any of the documented ceremonies in Wat Carolina’s early years which were open to the public.⁴¹⁰ Sunataree Hemawong deliberately avoids sharing these teachings with Western visitors at the temple because “if people not practicing they say ‘you are insane, you are mentally ill.’” This omission is particularly surprising because Sunataree believes that in a previous lifetime she was a Native American who lived on the land Wat Carolina currently occupies. Sunataree even claimed it had gotten to the point where she did not feel comfortable sharing these teachings with the descendants of the original founding Thai immigrants. She claimed that while the older generation still believed in kamma and rebirth, much of the newer generation no longer believed

⁴⁰⁹ Will Baunach Transcript.

⁴¹⁰ Box 47, Folder 13, Buddhism: Dr. Walter H. Conser Jr. Papers- Wat Carolina Buddhajakra Vanaram-Wilmington/Bolivia; Theravada – Thailand, Randall Library Special Collections, Wilmington, North Carolina.

due to the influence of Western culture.⁴¹¹ This generation gap suggests that teachings on kamma and rebirth may begin to fade entirely from North Carolina Theravada Buddhism as Western converts begin to replace the original generation of Buddhist immigrants.

The Western converts of SIMC have proven equally resistant towards teaching on kamma and rebirth as those at Wat Carolina. However, due to the disproportionate number of Western converts present at SIMC, the presence of these teachings is actively discouraged rather than simply ignored. As a result, from the early stages of his temples Bhante Ujotika made a conscious decision to only introduce these teachings to Westerners “after many years.”⁴¹² Like many Buddhist temples in recent decades, SIMC has a Western convert who assists the head monk in making dhamma talks more accessible to the average public. Will Baunach, Bhante Ujotika’s assistant, is frank in his desire to encourage Bhante to stick to teachings which are “relevant to our day to day life.” According to Will, he and Bhante Ujotika have argued over this methodology for many years. The teachings Will Baunach encourages center around meditation practices which can benefit one’s mental and emotional state.⁴¹³ Baunach is one of many practitioners at SIMC, and in North Carolina, who believe that accepting teachings on rebirth is not necessary to being an effective and authentic Buddhist.⁴¹⁴ The majority share Kasem Mosen’s mindset that as long as they “take what the Buddha taught” and “apply it to (their) life and reduce suffering, and reduce the suffering of others” that they are a perfectly authentic Buddhist.⁴¹⁵

⁴¹¹ Sunataree Hemawong Transcript.

⁴¹² Bhante Ujotika Transcript.

⁴¹³ Will Baunach Transcript.

⁴¹⁴ “Welcome to Serenity Insight Meditation Center”; Gordon Legge, “Guilt-free Buddhism gaining popularity,” *Toronto Star*, 6 January 1996.

⁴¹⁵ Kasem Mosen Transcript.

Perhaps the most straightforward example of how Theravada Buddhist teachings have changed in North Carolina can be seen in how Western converts respond to teachings on the Pancasila. In Thailand and Burma traditional Buddhists are typically quite passionate in following the Pancasila individually and as a group. This devotion is largely due to the widespread belief that following the Pancasila will lead to a healthy society, as well as ending all wars and injustice.⁴¹⁶ Vincent Bove also noted that truly following the Pancasila is a much more complex and intensive process than Western converts usually understand. For instance, in East Asia the prohibition against intoxicants includes rejecting the obsessive desire for wealth and power, not just alcohol and drugs. Also, the prohibition against lying includes any manner of speech which is intentionally misleading.⁴¹⁷ These strict interpretations of the Pancasila often clash with aspects of American and North Carolina culture in a multitude of ways. As a result, the observance of the Pancha Sila often differs drastically from what one would have seen in a traditional Southeast Asian community.

A common tradition in America which has spread to North Carolina is the practice of only periodically and temporarily acknowledging and following the Pancasila. In Southeast Asia more dedicated Buddhists are expected to follow the Pancasila to the point of avoiding various forms of music, television, dancing, and even makeup and perfume.⁴¹⁸ Many practitioners at Wat Carolina and SIMC only “take refuge” (vow to follow) in the Precepts once or twice a month, or just once a year, and only follow them for a limited amount of time.⁴¹⁹ This decision is typically

⁴¹⁶ “Importance of the Five Precepts,” *The Sunday Observer, Sri Lanka*, 6 June 2012.

⁴¹⁷ Vincent Bove Transcript.

⁴¹⁸ “Sīla,” In *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, edited by Robert E. Jr. Buswell, and Donald S. Jr. Lopez, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2013.)

⁴¹⁹ Wendy Cadge, *Heartwood: The First Generation of Theravada Buddhism in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 155.

the result of a dislike of rules Western converts believe are “not even relevant anymore.”⁴²⁰

According to Suzanne Pun Sila most often broken in the Asheville area is the Precept against consuming intoxicants. Due to the popularity of wine and craft beers in Asheville, many practitioners at SIMC have even asked Bhante Ujotika if they can follow four Precepts instead of five. Western converts also often report feeling restricted by the admonitions against popular entertainment and beauty products. As a result, typically even the most dedicated practitioners at SIMC only vow to follow the Pancha Silla once a week. ⁴²¹

The continuing decline of the Southeast Asian immigrant population in North Carolina has allowed Western self-help ideology to rapidly grow in its influence on Theravada Buddhism. Americanized preferences towards practical knowledge or daily application, preferences which date back to the Victorian era and were further popularized by IMS, have resulted in a growing departure from the esoteric teachings of classical Theravada Buddhism. Both Wat Carolina and SIMC have at least begun the process of accommodating the priorities and pre-conceived beliefs of Western converts into their presentation of the dhamma. However, the continuing romantic desire for an “authentic” Southeast Asian Buddhist experience has ensured that American Buddhism is not a wholly new creation. One of the primary elements preventing a complete break from the past is the romantic desire of North Carolina converts to find an “authentic” Southeast Asian teacher.⁴²² As long as classical Theravada monks such as Bhante Ujotika and Abbot Phrakru are able to maintain their influence in the state, North Carolina Buddhism will remain in a state of simultaneous continuity and discontinuity.

⁴²⁰ Vincent Bove Transcript.

⁴²¹ Bhante Ujotika Transcript.

⁴²² Vincent Bove Transcript; Welcome to SIMC.

Conclusion

Buddhism in a Hundred Years: The Future of Theravada Buddhism in North Carolina

“In the United States... actually it’s kind of unique in 2000 years. What’s happened in the United States is we’re getting all three branches of Buddhism co-mingling, Theravadin, Zen, and Theravadin ... Tibetan, and that’s actually unique in history, in the past that’s never actually happened.”

- Will Baunach

“Because they’re (the descendants of the original immigrants) not interested in the Buddhism teaching. And they do not even listen to (what) the parents tell them, they do not listen. Younger generation now is very difficult. That’s why it decline in the number of the monks, declining in the number of people who are coming to practice. Because of the new generation. They are on the new technology, more interested than... so they are more interested in that than in studying like this.”

- Sunataree Hemawong

The Face of Buddhism in North Carolina

Without question the current state of Buddhism in North Carolina differs drastically from what has historically been observed in traditional Theravada countries. In fact, Theravada Buddhism as practiced in North Carolina in many cases has become virtually incomprehensible to many of the first Southeast Asian immigrants who brought the tradition to the state. The experiences of Wat Carolina and Serenity Insight Meditation Center perfectly demonstrate the transition Theravada Buddhism has undergone from the 1960’s to the present day. In North Carolina, Theravada Buddhism has been transformed from being an immigrant controlled tradition to a Western convert tradition. Overall this transition has resulted in a Westernized

Buddhist tradition which is primarily concerned with practical enlightenment in daily life as opposed to liberation from the world.⁴²³ Not only does this development have significant implications for the nature of the historical development of Buddhism in the American South, it also illuminates fascinating avenues of research historians should consider as Buddhism moves into the future.

The most notable marker for how much a Theravada Buddhist has changed during its time in North Carolina is the makeup of its internal community. Due to a Theravada monk's reliance upon his/her sangha as both follower and basic support system, a temple's internal community has influence upon their decisions. Wat Carolina is noted for its strict continuation of Thai Buddhist practices and beliefs, both by Southeast Asian immigrants and Western converts.⁴²⁴ Most credit this sustainability to the continued and active, although declining, presence of the original Thai immigrant community in supporting Abbot Phrakru's lifestyle and teachings. Abbot Phrakru's consistency is even more impressive when considering the large amount of Protestant churches which had already existed in Bolivia. On the other hand, Bhante Ujotika has been forthright about his decision to alter his teachings to appeal to Western converts at SIMC. This alteration was a direct response to the recognition that most of his sangha, and therefore daily support system, would have to consist of Western converts who were deeply influenced by Asheville culture.⁴²⁵ The differing rates at which Wat Carolina and SIMC have altered their teachings reinforces the importance of a temple's internal community in influencing its culture.

⁴²³ Ann Gleig, "From Theravada to Tantra: The Making of an American Tantric Buddhism?", *Contemporary Buddhism* 14, no. 2 (2013): 221-238, 231.

⁴²⁴ Vincent Bove, interviewed by Zachary Morgan, June 19th, 2019, transcript; Jim Copp, interviewed by Zachary Morgan, June 22nd, 2019, transcript; Sunataree Hemavong, interviewed by Zachary Morgan, July 25th, 2019, transcript.

⁴²⁵ Bhante Ujotika Bhivamsa, interviewed by Zachary Morgan, June 4th, 2019, transcript.

Despite the differing pace of change, both Wat Carolina and SIMC have experienced identifiable alterations in how they present foundational Theravada teachings to their followers. These alterations largely revolve around the American preference towards practical daily applications of religion at the expense of traditional esoteric teachings found in East Asia. As a result, teachings on the thirty-one realms, rebirth, and charitable living have taken on less significance at Wat Carolina and SIMC.⁴²⁶ However, due to the prevalence of what Thomas Tweed identified as a romantic Buddhism, Western converts have continued to seek out traditional South Asian teachers such as Abbot Phrakru and Bhante Ujotika.⁴²⁷ This desire has ensured that while Western converts have grown to dominate most Buddhist centers in the state, a connection still exists between these two groups and Southeast Asian Buddhism due to their desire for an “authentic” Theravada experience. Historians would be wise to consider the changes Theravada Buddhism in North Carolina might experience once these aging immigrant teachers are no longer available to guide Western convert temples.

In contrast to internal communities, the external communities of Wat Carolina and SIMC appear to have made a far less substantial impact upon the behavior and teachings of North Carolina Buddhists. Both monks, as well as their followers, largely reported neutral and limited interactions with the communities in which their temples are located. Despite the initial fears of both groups regarding the South’s racist reputation, no members of Wat Carolina or SIMC described any instances of negative interactions with conservative Christians in North Carolina.⁴²⁸ These relationships largely refute Jeff Wilson’s claim that Southern Buddhists in the

⁴²⁶ Bhante Ujotika Transcript; Sunataree Hemawong Transcript;

⁴²⁷ Thomas A. Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism: 1844-1912 ; Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 69.

⁴²⁸ Suzanne Pun, interviewed by Zachary Morgan, June 4th, 2019, transcript; Sunataree Hemawong Transcript.

21st century were forced to alter their relationships with conservative Christians in order to avoid persecution.⁴²⁹ While persecution against North Carolina Buddhists has no doubt occurred, the vast majority of these instances have proven to be the result of ethnic rather than religious backlash. For example, the only notable difficulty Buddhist Laos immigrant Dnail Phrakousonh has faced in Morganton, North Carolina is discrimination due to his supposed Chinese heritage.⁴³⁰ In most cases, as Barbara Mang says, most native North Carolinian residents seem to view Theravada Buddhists as a non-threatening and acceptable presence in their communities.

Looking Ahead: The Potential Futures of Wat Carolina and SIMC

One aspect of North Carolina Buddhism that should be analyzed in the future is the potential continuing decline and dispersal of immigrant involvement in Theravada temples as a whole. Immigrant participation first began to decline when practitioners at temples such as Wat Carolina began to spread into other immigrant communities. The spread of these temples resulted in a lesser concentration of Southeast Asian immigrant and monastic support at individual temples across the state.⁴³¹ Therefore, Western converts currently outnumber Southeast Asian immigrants at many Theravada temples across the state and country.⁴³² This disparity will almost certainly continue to grow as original immigrant communities continue to age and are no longer able to be involved in daily temple activities. Sunataree Hemawong is quick to point out the impact this aging is already having upon Abbot Phrakru's daily support system.⁴³³ Future

⁴²⁹ Jeff Wilson, *Dixie Dharma: Inside a Buddhist Temple in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University Of North Carolina Press, 2014), 6.

⁴³⁰ Clune, Katy A. "Home in a New Place: Making Laos in Morganton, North Carolina." *Southern Cultures* 22, no. 1 (2016): 95-112, 104.

⁴³¹ Sunataree Hemawong Transcript; Crystal S. Tatum, "A Day in the Life of the Buddhist Monks at Wat Carolina," *Wilmington Star*, 20 September 2006.

⁴³² "Religious Landscape Study, Buddhists: Immigrant Status Among Buddhists," PEW Research Center.org, 2014, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/buddhist/>.

⁴³³ Sunataree Hemawong Transcript.

historians and religious studies academics should continue to consider the effects of the declining immigrant community as North Carolina Buddhism continues to find new ways to express itself in the future. It might also be beneficial to examine what happens as Southeast Asian Buddhist immigrants continue to arrive in America, particularly in how they interact with temples such as Wat Carolina and SIMC.

In relation to the dispersal of Southeast Asian immigrants across North Carolina, it would also be beneficial for future historians to trace the paths of these immigrants as they bring Theravada Buddhism to new areas. While Sunataree Hemawong and Vincent Bove were united in their belief that the departure of monks from Wat Carolina to start their own temples had contributed to the center's decline, neither of them were able to recall where exactly these monks had gone.⁴³⁴ Examining the history of temples which were directly founded by former members of Wat Carolina would allow historians to more accurately determine whether or not the impact of internal communities at Theravada temples has been uniform across the state. If the monks at these new temples decided over time to alter traditional teachings in order to appeal to Western audiences, it would greatly bolster the argument made by this thesis on the importance of internal communities. Further, this line of inquiry would also make it possible to more broadly examine the history of Theravada Buddhism across the American South. Due to Wat Carolina's connection to various Southeast immigrant communities in multiple Southern states, future historians could potentially examine how Wat Carolina's original immigrant community has interacted with Western converts in a vast geographical region.

Another likely effect of the decline of immigrant participation in Theravada Buddhism will be the blending of the major Buddhist traditions within Theravada temples. Many Western

⁴³⁴ Vincent Bove Transcript; Sunataree Hemawong Transcript.

converts, such as Will Baunach, are already actively pressuring their Southeast Asian monks to abandon their strict preference towards Theravada teachings.⁴³⁵ At Wat Carolina, Jim Copp credited the preservation of Theravada teaching entirely to the personality and practices of Abbot Phrakru.⁴³⁶ As Western converts continue to take over leadership roles from immigrant communities, the blending of Theravada, Mahayana, and Zen traditions will likely only increase as Southeast Asian monks lose their influence. This blending can already be seen at North Carolina centers such as the Southern Dharma Retreat Center, which actively offers meditation teachings from various “Buddhist and related traditions.”⁴³⁷ As more and more Buddhist temples embrace the leadership of Western converts, it grows increasingly likely that this blending of traditions will become a fact of life in North Carolina Buddhism.

Finally, another fascinating development in the future of North Carolina Buddhism that researchers would be prudent to consider is the effect of transnational immigration and migration on the tradition globally. While this project has focused exclusively on immigration to the United States, many Buddhist immigrants have traveled, or returned, to Thailand and Burma throughout the same time period. For instance, Bhante Ujotika regularly returns to Burma to give dhamma talks and provide monastic education to novices.⁴³⁸ It is also not uncommon for Western converts to go on pilgrimages to sacred Buddhist sites in Southeast Asia to experience “authentic” Theravada Buddhism.⁴³⁹ Various academics have begun to recognize the importance of transnational Buddhist pilgrimages in creating diplomatic and cultural ties in the post-colonial

⁴³⁵ Will Baunach Transcript.

⁴³⁶ Jim Copp Transcript.

⁴³⁷ “About: Missions and Vision,” Southern Dharma Retreat Center, 2019, <http://www.southerndharma.org/about/#my-tabs-0>.

⁴³⁸ Will Baunach Transcript.

⁴³⁹ Jack Downey, “We Drank Many Gin and Tonics’: Desire and Enchantment in Merton’s Buddhist Pilgrimage.” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 37, no. 1 (2017): 73-92, 84.

world.⁴⁴⁰ Anyone who researches this topic in the future should consider what impact Americanized Buddhist teachings have had when reintroduced to their original countries.

“We’ve Been Very Happy All Along:” The Legacy of North Carolina Buddhism

Perhaps the most satisfying legacy of this project is the variety of positive relationships and interactions between North Carolina immigrant Buddhists and their new communities which have been discovered. Most Southeast Asian immigrants have expressed overwhelming satisfaction with their experiences in North Carolina, whether it is with the food or the generosity of their local community. Some North Carolina Christians, such as Barbara Mang, have even begun to consider Buddhist immigrants in their communities as close as their family.⁴⁴¹ Throughout the course of my research, I was even able to aid in the reunion of Barbara Mang with Bhante Ujotika, whom she had taught English several years before. The happiness both showed in being reacquainted with each other perhaps illustrates better than anything else the strong relationships that have been formed between cultures in North Carolina. While it is important to recognize the instances of prejudice and discrimination which still occur in the state, it is equally important to recognize the instances when individuals of different religious beliefs are able to find a common humanity. The discovery and recognition of these relationships is one of the most impactful reasons why researching Buddhism in North Carolina can and should be continued well into the future.

⁴⁴⁰ David Geary, "Rebuilding the Navel of the Earth: Buddhist Pilgrimage and Transnational Religious Networks." *Modern Asian Studies* 48, no. 3 (2014): 645-692, 660.

⁴⁴¹ Barbara Mang, interviewed by Zachary Morgan, June 12th, 2019, transcript.

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