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A JOINING OF HANDS: FORM, FUNCTION, AND DIVERSITY AT A BUDDHIST
MONASTERY IN BATESVILLE, MISSISSIPPI

A Thesis
presented in fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology
The University of Mississippi

by
TANNA O. TAN
May 2013

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ABSTRACT

Buddhism is a religious tradition that spans the globe, and has erupted in popularity in the United States since the 1960's. This is a study of Thích Nhất Hạnh's "Mindfulness" practice center, Magnolia Grove Monastery, in Batesville, Mississippi. Participant observation and interviews are implemented to understand the local concerns of its practitioners, and how they deal with these concerns. "Mindfulness" practice is made locally relevant to its practitioners through what I term "localization processes." These processes enable members at the site to negotiate different meanings of this tradition amongst themselves. An individual's "localization process" consists of several "boundaries" or elements that separate practitioners along several lines. This includes language use, the interpretation of religious and meditative practices, and psychosocial elements.

Because several groups are using the same site at the same time for multiple reasons, there is ambiguity in the interpretation of what "Mindfulness" is, and how it should be interpreted and practiced. Based on my observations and interviews, these interpretations, while different, did not infringe upon other people's interpretation of "Mindfulness." This allows members at the site to practice "Mindfulness" however they choose.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the monastics and practitioners I have met at Magnolia Grove. If it wasn't for all of your kind words, warm gestures, and open hearts, I would not have been able to complete this journey. I hope that this work reflects the simple peacefulness that is always evident at the monastery. I am grateful to have the opportunity to share your wonderful stories.

Also, I dedicate this work to my husband. Thank you for your love and patience throughout this process.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I. INTRODUCTION

It was an abnormally cold day in Batesville, Mississippi, as a fellow colleague and I rambled down what could only be described as a “country road”: no formal street signs, lights, or any indication of whether or not we were traveling on the correct side of the road. Trees lined this path on both sides; their leaves turning pale shades of reds and oranges, signifying autumn had come at last. I was excited, but anxious. I was a “newborn” in the realm of academic work outside of the classroom setting, not always realizing the significance of everything I saw, heard, or experienced. Much like a newborn, I also had an underdeveloped filter in the sense that I had no first-hand experience on what would be considered “proper” things to talk about or ask without offending someone as I had never before been to a Buddhist monastery. I knew of my limitations in theory, but I hoped at that time that they would not become a hindrance to me as I tried to make connections with people. I could feel my heart beating in my chest, and the further and further we drove away from the main road, the deeper and deeper I felt that I was literally “entering the field.”

And of course, it rained. Not the dreadful sort of raining one experiences where it completely drenches you to the bone and makes your shoes produce that awful, wet, squeaking sound, but the kind that seems to seep through your clothes undetected until you suddenly feel cold and wet. Driving further down the road, I noticed several wooden signs that seemed to be handmade and written in green cursive script directing visitors towards the Magnolia Grove monastery, the site of my field work. For every sign I read in English, there was another identical sign adjacent to it, or near it, in Vietnamese. Turning into the graveled parking area, I noticed part of one sign in particular that read *Làng Mai* which I came to learn

meant “Plum Village” in Vietnamese¹. The instances of Vietnamese language and culture were readily visible before we even reached the facility. I gazed out of the rain splattered window of the vehicle, and I spotted someone whom I would learn was one of the many nuns that lived at the facility. She was dressed in the tradition's monastic attire, with simple, long, brown robes shielding her from the harsh elements as she peered in our direction from underneath her conical hat. She smiled, waved, and proceeded to direct me to what was a sort of gathering area. I got out of the truck, and watched as my colleague drove off, feeling very much alone and unsure of myself. I tried to maintain my composure as I quickly ran under the nearby veranda where I was directed so I could escape the rain.

There were several doors underneath the veranda: two entrances to an industrial-sized kitchen, a larger door leading into the main meditation hall, and one other door adjacent to the meditation hall. When I walked through this door, I noticed the walls were plain white with the floors a matching cream color running throughout the room. There were several lines of grey, plastic, folding tables and chairs that filled up the space with a tall water cooler and drink racks up against the nearest wall to the entrance. The drink rack housed boxes of various instant beverages such as oolong, brown rice, and green teas along with instant coffees and chocolate milk powder. Below the shelf with the beverages was another shelf containing an assortment of mugs, teacups, glasses, and spoons, with the last shelf holding large containers of creamers, sugars, and extra powder mixes. This room, I soon learned, served as the general dining area for the monastics, retreatants, and visitors.

Scanning the room once again, I noticed the walls were decorated minimally with Zen paintings of a black circle against a clean white background with the Vietnamese or English cursive writing in the center of the circle. The calligraphy drawing on the wall merely had the

1

. “Plum Village” refers to: 1) The main center for Mindfulness practice located in southern France headed by Thích Nhất Hạnh 2) Any officially recognized institution following the Thích Nhất Hạnh approach is considered to be following the “Plum Village Tradition.”

word “Breathe” written in the middle of the circle, and the Vietnamese drawing, when translated, said “Breathe, my Dear.” During this first visit, the only other visible decoration in this room was a framed picture of an older monk with kind eyes and an infectious smile: it was a photograph of Thích Nhất Hạnh.

Brown robes shuffled in and out of the area, and I began to feel awkward and out of place. Although I am only five foot and an inch, I suddenly felt like I was ten feet tall and clumsy. People began to take notice of my presence, and within a few minutes, I was swarmed by an array of shaven-head, brown robed, monastics smiling sweetly at me as they asked me questions. More than once, I was offered a breakfast meal or tea, and while I declined as politely as I knew how, I wasn't altogether sure if I should decline and then accept their offer, or hold to my own honesty and continue to refuse a meal since I had just eaten.

As they continued to ask me questions with unequal degrees of fluency in English. Often, they reverted back to Vietnamese amongst themselves as they discussed what to ask next, and I prayed to whomever happened to be listening at the time that these graceful-looking, pleasant monastics would not be able to see how incredibly nervous and “un-Buddhist” like I felt at that moment. This must be how so many other anthropologists and social scientists feel when they “enter into the field” for the first time: thrown in head-first and into the deep end, expected to either sink or swim as they rise to the occasion in the hopes of producing an ethnographic work that would make others proud to call themselves fellow academics.

A NEGOTIATION OF MEANINGS: QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

The monastics and people I mentioned in the entry story practice a form of Buddhism commonly referred to as “Mindful Living” or “Mindfulness.” Therefore, my research

objective focuses on how the members and the retreatants of Magnolia Grove Monastery approach the practice of “Mindfulness” in their daily lives. My central questions are: How is “Mindfulness” made locally relevant to the practitioners at Magnolia Grove? What are some of the concerns of its practitioners, and how are these concerns addressed at the site? I contend that “Mindfulness” is made locally relevant to its practitioners through what I term “localization processes.” As I will detail in later chapters, “localization processes” enable members at the site to negotiate different interpretations of “Mindfulness” amongst themselves to meet individual or group concerns while not infringing upon other concerns or interpretations of the practice. This term is based on Ulf Hannerz's (1992) use of the term “localization” and will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapters.

By analyzing a Buddhist monastery located in what is commonly referred to as the deep South, this will offer a prime field site in which to analyze how “Ethnic” and “Convert” Buddhisms come together in practice in the United States through a case study of a Buddhist center in Batesville, Mississippi. “Convert” or “New Buddhism” is a term used by scholars to reference Buddhist institutions and meditation centers in western Europe and the United States that have mainly practitioners from white, upper-middle class, educated backgrounds (Coleman 2000:20), whereas “Ethnic” Buddhism is a term used by scholars when analyzing Buddhist practitioners from places where Buddhism has its “roots” which includes places like India, China, Vietnam, and Japan. While people from these countries have settled in the United States, and have been living here for generations, within the literature, their institutions and members are often treated separate from another even though these adherents are both practicing in the United States.

Throughout my field work, I looked to see whether Magnolia Grove would strictly fall into one of the two categories mentioned earlier of “Ethnic” or “Convert,” or if the site

contained elements from both categories. Some specific questions I hoped to answer were: “What is the role of the Magnolia Grove Monastery for monastics, those that practice regularly at the site, and those visiting for retreats? Is it an ethnically-driven religious institution, or is it one characterized by new converts whose family religion is something other than Buddhism? Or, is it something else entirely?” By comparing my site to the relevant literature, similarities and differences emerged that showed where Magnolia Grove is in the larger picture of Buddhism in the United States. With such visibility of Buddhist practices among both religious and nonreligious groups in the United States, research geared towards understanding Buddhists and Buddhist practices within the country as it confronts new environments and people would add to existing knowledge of the adaptive processes of religions and the people who practice them.

“BREATHING IN, BREATHING OUT”: BUDDHISM, THICH NHAT HANH, AND THE PRACTICE OF “MINDFULNESS”

Buddhism is an umbrella-term used to reference any religious, spiritual practice, or way of life that follows the teachings and examples of the historical figure, Gautama Siddhārtha, also known as Śākyamuni or the “sage of the Śākya clan” (Carrithers 2001:12; Takeuchi 1997:xv). Throughout the years, Buddhism has spread to different countries and places all over the world, from the region of South Asia to the Americas and elsewhere, and as people have carried its message, elements of the practice changed and adapted to fit particular sociocultural environments. It is, therefore, important to start with a general history of Buddhism in order to have the ethnographic context needed to depict the specific variation of Buddhism practiced by the members at the field site.

Buddhism is considered one of the oldest religions in the world still practiced today in various forms and in many different countries (Mitchell 2002:1-2; Morris 2006:44). While

each tradition or subset of Buddhism differs in terms of specific ideologies and practices, a central tenet espoused by the historical Buddha was that, “companions [meaning, anyone who follows his teachings] should pursue the middle way, avoiding the extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification...The four noble truths present the fact of suffering in this world and the means to end suffering” (Anderson 2004:296). By following the “Middle Way” between excess and self-deprivation outlined in what is known as the “Eightfold Path,” the Buddha taught that one can escape the endless cycle of suffering in the world. This is one common element found in most Buddhist traditions practiced today, including Magnolia Grove.

The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path are referenced either explicitly or implicitly by many traditions influenced by the Buddha's teachings. The Four Noble Truths are outlined as: 1) the existence of suffering (*dukkha*) in the world, 2) the arising or origin of suffering that is craving, desires, and attachments (the truth of *samudaya*), 3) the cessation of suffering by ending or eliminating one's desires and attachments (the truth of *nirodha*), 4) the path that has eight parts which entails Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration (the truth of *magga*; Anderson 2004:296). There are several different “schools” of Buddhist thought, but the principles of the Four Noble Truths and the subsequent Eightfold Path anchors many Buddhist traditions, and provides a vital background for the rituals and practice found at the field site, Magnolia Grove. “The Eightfold Path is a guideline for practitioners to achieve enlightenment by means of living a moral Buddhist life (Reat 1994:40).

The major “schools” of Buddhist thought are often defined as Theravāda (“Lesser Vehicle”), Mahāyāna (“Greater Vehicle”), and Vajrayana (“Diamond Vehicle”) Buddhism, respectively, and are oftentimes associated with the various regions of the world where particular kinds of Buddhism dominate over other schools (Gellner 2003:45-46;48; Morris

2006:68; Reat 1994:70-72). The tradition known as Zen Buddhism is considered part of the larger school of Mahāyāna, and places considerable emphasis on meditation and meditative practices, breathing, and maintaining a state of stability. The style of Buddhism practiced at Magnolia Grove is considered to be a specific kind of Vietnamese Zen tradition called by various names including “Mindfulness”, “Mindful Living”, and “Engaged Buddhism.” This tradition was made famous by the Zen monk, Thích Nhất Hạnh.

Thích Nhất Hạnh, a Vietnamese monk, is considered the founder and central leader of the style of practice adhered to by Magnolia Grove members. Now residing in Plum Village, a monastery in southern France, Thích Nhất Hạnh is famous for peace advocacy, social activism, and for coining the term “Engaged Buddhism.” Although Thích Nhất Hạnh created the term in reference to his interpretation of Buddhism and Buddhist practices, “Engaged Buddhism” has since been adopted by religious scholars and social scientists to describe, “[A] kind of active involvement by Buddhists in societies and its problems. Participants in this nascent movement seek to actualize Buddhism’s traditional ideals of wisdom and compassion in today’s world.” (Eppsteiner 1988:xii). Rather than focusing on classical elements of religious Buddhism such as gods, goddesses, and reincarnation, “Engaged Buddhism” focuses on, as Christopher Queen (2000:1) iterates, “the application of the Dharma, or Buddhist teachings, to the resolution of social problems [that] has emerged in the context of a global conversation on human rights, distributive justice, and social progress.” Since the central aspect of “Engaged Buddhism” revolves around practices of meditation and becoming consciously aware in the present moment of daily life, thus referring to the tradition as “Mindfulness” or “Mindful Living.”

“Mindfulness Practice” or “Mindful Living,” the basis of Thích Nhất Hạnh's “Engaged Buddhism” movement, emphasizes the importance of being aware at all times of one’s daily life to bring about social change based on understanding and peace (Prebish

1999:36; Mitchell 2002:322). The ideas and practices found within “Mindfulness” are also outlined in Thích Nhất Hạnh’s own books (1987;1991) *The Miracle of Mindfulness* and *Peace is Every Step*. In everything that one does, from eating and drinking to working and playing, Thích Nhất Hạnh advises his followers to be aware of their minds, bodies, and actions in order to fully live “in the here and the now”, as he commonly refers to it in speeches and in his writings. In this thesis, I will refer to the practices at Magnolia Grove as “Mindfulness” or “Mindful Living” since my informants used that term more often than “Engaged Buddhism.”

To give examples of what it means to “Live Mindfully,” I will discuss various songs written and used by the members of this tradition to illustrate the fundamental values of its practitioners. In the short song, “I Have Arrived,” a portion of the lyrics are as follows:

I have arrived, I am home
In the here, and in the now
I am solid, I am free...
In the ultimate I dwell

This song refers to the importance of living in the present moment as the present moment is the only moment in which living things are truly alive. The phrase, “In the ultimate I dwell,” was not explicitly defined to me, however, in a Buddhist connotation or in any other religious terms during my research. This leads me to believe that there is flexibility in the interpretation of the song itself as to the meaning of what “dwelling in the ultimate” means for the individual.

Another example of what it means to “Practice Mindfully” is the song “When I Rise” which speaks of performing daily activities in such a way as to promote peace within oneself and the world around them. It conjures up imagery of comparing people's daily lives with pictures of nature and animals. In part, the lyrics “And when I fall, let me fall like a leaf, gracefully, without regrets...And when I work, let me work like a bee, whole-heartedly”

shows not only how one should do things in a “Mindful” manner, but uses depictions of nature such as the leaf or the bee to illustrate the central theme of the practice of “Mindfulness.” In other words, because the foundation of this practice centers on living a simple life in the present moment, depictions of nature are invoked to illustrate the commonality and interconnection between human beings and the natural world.

One of the most discussed practices relating to “Living Mindfully” is the attention to one's breath as a way to achieve calmness and peace of mind. Becoming aware of one's breath is done by such things as paying attention to the rise and fall of one's abdomen as breathing occurs, counting one's breath while simultaneously counting one's steps while walking, and by noticing how fast or slow one breathes normally and otherwise. Once again, this cornerstone of “Mindfulness” is expressed in a song used by the tradition's followers called “Breathing In, Breathing Out,” and parts of the lyrics are:

Breathing in, breathing out
I am water reflecting
What is real, what is true
And I feel there is space
Deep inside of me
I am free, I am free

It is evident in the words of the song how important breathing is to the practice of “Mindfulness” as it opens the door to see “what is real, what is true,” and it provides a sense of freedom by releasing tensions through one's breath. It is important to note, however, that breathing practices are not new to Buddhism or other religions such as Hinduism, but it can be argued that it is emphasized much more by this approach than some of the other Buddhist traditions.

To enumerate, Thích Nhất Hạnh's “Mindfulness” approach is not necessarily new in terms of the specific practices he espouses such as breathing and walking exercises as these views can also be found in classic Buddhist traditions. But according to several of my

informants, it is the simplicity and freedom from traditional notions of strict dogma that attract people to Thích Nhất Hạnh's approach. It is flexible in its interpretations for its practitioners, so one need not give up any other religious affiliations in order to also practice "Mindful Living." As one of my informants, B.C., told me by means of paraphrasing one of Thích Nhất Hạnh's popular phrases, "Anyone can practice 'Mindfulness' because all you have to do is breathe, and everyone can do that."

I contend that it is these multiple interpretations of what it means to live a "Mindful Life" that create, maintain, and shift what are called boundaries and identities of the individuals and groups found at Magnolia Grove. In essence, it is through these differing interpretations on how people "do religion" that lines of incorporation, contestation, and adaptation are drawn symbolically that ultimately structures the informant's social environment and interactions with one another.

LOOKING AT THE LITERATURE: "ETHNIC", "CONVERT", AND "OTHER" BUDDHISMS

Buddhism has been studied in a variety of scholarships ranging from religious studies and theology to anthropology, sociology, and international studies. Because there are many different people studying different things, Buddhism in the United States, and Buddhism as a religion in general, has had many "voices of authority" speaking on its behalf. What I mean by this phrase is that various groups, from intellectual scholars to those who practice Buddhism as part of the family's traditional religion, to those who seek to understand Buddhism free from its original religious orientation, all assert their voice in describing "what Buddhism is." There are several ways that scholars have "looked" at Buddhism thus far.

Some for instance, focus on the practice of sending remittances back to one's home country in order to support local temples or churches (Ha 2002:111), and others still

emphasize the exposure to Buddhism in non-religious settings such as in classrooms as part of a “global culture” (Hexham and Poewe 1997:43; Azaransky 2012:160-164). I agree with Wendy Cadge (2007:202), a prominent scholar in the area, who contends that, “Buddhist forms of meditation [are] taught everywhere from Christian churches to gyms, and increasingly through forms of complementary and alternative medicine.” It is this visibility of Buddhism in areas outside of religion and philosophy that have spurred scholars to continually study the subject from other vantage points. In the past, however, scholars had drawn boundaries of Buddhist practices and ideas based on physical boundaries such as national or regional boundaries.

Scholars had concerned themselves with the religious practices and rituals tied to places such as India, China, Japan, Taiwan, and Vietnam while others turn their attention to the development of Buddhism and Buddhist practices within the United States (Tamney 1992; Williams and Queen 1999; Coleman 2001). While these studies illuminate the developments that the religion has undergone since its migration to the United States, “American Buddhism” is as diverse and varied as the kinds of people drawn into Buddhism. The literature, however, focuses on large urban places such as Los Angeles or Chicago like in Charles Numrich’s (1996) work on the “Americanization” of certain Buddhist institutions, or in Prebish’s (1999:94-172) work on Buddhist communities in North America. To make sense of the data along meaningful lines, scholars have either explicitly or implicitly divided these Buddhist institutions broadly along the lines of “Ethnic Buddhist” places of worship or “Convert Buddhist” places of worship.

For instance, James Coleman (2000:13;15), gives several elements that are distinctive to this flavor of Buddhism in the United States. Several distinctions mentioned are that, “[the] fundamental distinction between monk and layperson is almost wiped away” by an active involvement by lay practitioners and monastics as well as emphasizing, “[I]f there is a single

characteristic that defines the new Buddhism for most of its members, it is the practice of meditation.” Coleman (2000:15) then continues onto another element of Buddhist practice in the United States on a more scholarly level, asserting that, “On a theoretical level...nearly all Western Buddhist groups recognize the full equality of the sexes and the ability of all persons of either gender to realize their true nature and attain enlightenment.” Buddhism in the United States in this case, is characterized by an emphasis on meditation, an awareness and expansion of the role of women in religious life, and the presence of white, educated, middle to upper-middle class members of society (mentioned previously by Tworokov [1999] and echoed Coleman [2000:20] and Jones [2007]). But, other scholars of Buddhism have broadened the scope of analysis to incorporate other elements such as the use of space and region to understand the development of practices in the United States.

More recently, in works such as Jeff Wilson’s (2009;2012) “Mapping the American Buddhist Terrain: Paths Taken and Possible” and *Dixie Dharma: Inside a Buddhist Temple in the American South* have also looked at how regionality, location, or environment may affect such things as religious practices, rituals, and functions of a particular religious institution. He gives ethnographic accounts spanning roughly a decade to detail the importance of region, space, and place in forming the identity of a Buddhist meditation center. Wilson emphasizes the need for further studies of Buddhist institutions, places of worship, and retreat centers in places other than large, urban cities with a diversity of people from all over the world. By extension, in broadening the scope of topics discussed when developing ethnographic analyses on the shape of Buddhism in the United States, Wilson promotes greater reflexivity in researching this topic.

For example, looking at places such as Ekoji Temple in Virginia which houses a variety of Buddhist traditions attended and led by white, educated lay persons (Wilson 2012:66-68), or the Laotian Buddhist ethnic temple in Iberia Parish, Louisiana (Zhou et. al

2002:54-56), past categories of “Ethnic” and “Convert” Buddhism like the previously mentioned labels lose some of their usefulness in providing ways to analyze data. While this previous taxonomy focusing on who had practiced Buddhism from birth versus those who became interested in Buddhism later in life was effective at the time, new ways of categorization are useful in a time characterized by social media, quicker national and international travel, and an increase in the flow of ideas from one side of the globe to the other. In essence, the previous ways of analyzing these topics needs to be addressed and reworked to account for the increasing amount of people and ideas that are no longer necessarily restrained by physical and symbolic boundaries.

Within the literature, analyzing Buddhist institutions and practices as either “Ethnic” or “Convert” separates groups of practitioners along distinctive ethno-religious boundaries. Thus, there are those Buddhists who are born into the tradition, and whose ethnic identity is intertwined with following Buddhism, and there are those Buddhists who do not have any ethnic or historical ties to the tradition. During my own work at Magnolia Grove, I observed both groups present at the site.

Due to the increasingly interconnectedness found in today's society with faster access to information and national and international travel, analyzing the changes and adaptations of people's religious practices as it moves into a new social environment will continue to be an important anthropological inquiry. With people constantly moving across, between, and among physical boundaries such as across national borders and symbolic boundaries such as class, the movement and influence of ideas and worldviews follows as well. It is up to social scientists and other scholars in related fields to take notice of the shifting of peoples, places, ideas, and life-paths in order to give an accurate and holistic analysis of today's world.

Localization in this research will be defined as the processes used by individuals or groups of individuals to adapt, accept, change, or reject new internal or external influences to

make order and significant meaning to ones social environment. This way of analyzing Buddhism and Buddhist practices is similar to the studies made by scholars who focus on the adaptations and adaptive processes made by immigrant religious groups after moving to the United States (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2002:vii-xvi). In Ebaugh and Chafetz work, religious congregations adapt to their home environments in several ways including an emphasis placed on the home country's language, reproducing cultural events as a way to maintain a sense of ethnic identity, and maintaining transnational ties with the country of origin through physical travel and communications through technology. These transnational links influence the production of religious practices both in the host country as well as in the home country.

These studies are important because by analyzing the site in this way, I answer the question, “How do members of Magnolia Grove 'do' religion, and how do their actions create, maintain, or reject boundaries of religious belonging and personal identity?” Ultimately, this thesis focuses on the concerns of the people at the site, and how they use “Mindfulness” practices to construct meaning in their lives.

“DOING” RELIGION?: BOUNDARIES AND “LOCALIZATION PROCESSES”

Like lines drawn in the sand, boundaries are formed by individuals, groups, societies, and even nations to bring meaning, order, and function to the world by various actors. Boundaries are important because they delineate “who belongs and who does not, about who we are and who threatens us” (Pettman 1996:262). These lines or boundaries are not static and unchanging, but shift, reform, or adapt to fit another time, place, or instance. Boundaries can act as a variety of mechanisms from offering inclusivity and a sense of belonging.

Boundaries can be a multitude of things ranging from language, ethnicity, and race to gender, class, age, and religion. These boundaries, once gathered together in a meaningful way can produce what I term “localization processes”. Boundaries are apt to change, shift,

and accommodate to fit different circumstances, different times, and different groups. This change is how localization processes can be formed, contested, and challenged by the members and retreatants at Magnolia Grove.

For the purposes of this project, localization processes involve making, rejecting, or adapting one's sense of self in relation to the physical and social environment of one's surroundings. People, both as individuals and as a group, delineate the boundaries of their identity by things such as language use, gender mores, values placed on learning one's background or ethnical heritage, and other things in order to maintain or create a sense of self or a sense of communal belonging. Examining how informants position themselves within the field site and in the society surrounding them brings robustness to the thesis analysis by illuminating how people decide which individuals are part of "in-groups" and who are part of the marginalized "out-groups."

Religious syncretism can also be a tool used by both scholars and religious participants and sympathizers that have the ability to create, maintain, or reject pre-existing boundaries. At the present moment, syncretism is defined as, "the combination of elements from two or more different religious traditions within a specified frame" (Stewart 1999:58). While the definition seems basic, scholars meet with difficulty when attempting to decide if a combination of two different religious traditions actually occurs, or whether those elements are merely analogous in nature, similar in form or function, but not in origin. Stewart (1999:58) continues to elaborate by stating that the frame used to form a conclusion on syncretic practices, "[is established] either on the basis of what the actors involved say, or on the basis of [the researcher's] analytical reasoning, as long as [they] clearly indicate when [they] are talking about which perspective."

Specifically, syncretism "describes the process by which cultures constitute themselves at any given time... [and is] no longer a transient 'stage' which will disappear

when, with time, assimilation occurs” (Stewart 1999:41). It should be noted, however, that, syncretism does not imply that these various “combinations” are in any way seamless, continuous, static, or without facing resistance or disjunction from internal or external influences. The “process by which cultures constitute themselves” is synonymous to the boundary blurring mechanisms that come together to form the localization processes analyzed in this project.

As I will detail in further chapters, it is this flexibility that promotes the shifting, contesting, and adaptations of what I see as boundaries that define who follows this tradition and how they define themselves and their practice in meaningful terms. This constructing, reflecting maintaining boundaries is what is central to my notion of the localization of Buddhism and Buddhist practices at the field site as it is these processes that create meaning, order, function, and influence for the site and for its members. If the member's boundaries shift and change, I contend, then their priorities and sense of identities change as well, and this is how localization occurs and thus transforms the site and its priorities to its members.

WHAT TO EXPECT: CHAPTERS AND SIGNIFICANCE

Chapter 2 of the thesis covers the topic of methodology in terms of how I collected the information needed, who did I speak to and why, and what sorts of questions and observations were made in order to produce the conclusions I arrived at in the analysis stage. Chapter 3 discusses the concerns expressed by my informants during my visits to Magnolia Grove. These sets of concerns often intersect and overlap with one another, and this produces internal diversity at the site in terms of how practitioners approach “Mindfulness.” Chapter 4 examines how these concerns are dealt with at the site, and Chapter 5 deals with the conclusion and future research prospects.

Expanding the analysis further, this project addresses the aforementioned use of the

labels “Ethnic” and “Convert” Buddhisms. While these terms have been used since the 1960's to articulate the growing visibility of practitioners who adhere to one or more elements typically associated with the religion, these terms need to be revisited to ensure its relevancy. Religion, spirituality, and identity construction are complex and multidimensional issues that are constantly changing and evolving through time, therefore, these topics must be revisited and reanalyzed in tandem with one another.

On a local level, this topic is significant in that it will expand upon other aspects of Buddhist institutions found within the US South as it shows the cultural richness of diversity sometimes overlooked by researchers studying the area. On an international or global level, it will be useful for those studying the movement and permeability of boundaries, religious practices, and ethnicity fueled by migration to the United States and elsewhere. As articulated earlier, this topic is also significant to academics who seek to expand their knowledge on Buddhism and Buddhist practices by becoming aware of their own position in the process of their research.

There are, however, points to consider when undertaking an analysis dealing with boundary constructions and identity formations by means of localization processes. It could be that the boundaries created and studied at Magnolia Grove are highly visible to researchers as the monastery is considered the newest official institution in the Plum Village to date. On the other hand, the data collected during this research may lead scholars to undertake similar investigations to replicate these findings and adjust their theories on religious practice, ethnicity, and identity accordingly. This case study means to draw attention to the way scholars and other researchers grapple with the delicate subject of the naming of religions sociocultural spaces as well as the people who occupy and define such spaces.

II. METHODOLOGY

Methodology is all about the choices a researcher makes when deciding how to answer a question or how to analyze the particular issue by using tools such as participant observation and interviews that will yield the most fruitful results (Bernard 1999:9). Therefore, to gain a thorough understanding of the processes used and implemented in this research, I will now describe the methods utilized which are qualitative in nature rather than quantitative. This section is divided into three parts, the first being what methods I used, the second being a synopsis of the informants, their interactions, and the subsequent interviews, and the third being why these particular methods and informants helped me to produce the analyses to the central questions of the project. All of these elements are essential in understanding the people of Magnolia Grove, their experiences, and how they interacted with the world around them.

Elaborating on the methods used in the process of conducting research at the field site provides transparency, and frees the project from inherent questions based on the limitations, inescapable biases, reflexivity issues that arise from such qualitative studies. In short, providing a detailed account of research methods used in the project helps promote an openness that is useful and needed within anthropology and other related fields.

In regards to methods, this project is a case-study involving participant observation, and other forms of qualitative research methods which yielded analyzable data about how the members at the Magnolia Grove practice “Living Mindfully”, and what that means for the different groups of participants at the site.

I used methods such as participant observations (where I am considered a willing actor in the everyday life of my informants as well as an observer), semi-structured structured

interviews (where I had a pre-approved interview guide that helped me, but did not restrict the types of questions I asked), and informal conversations with informants whether alone or in a group setting (Dewalt 2002). As inherent in the method of participant observation, I also took copious amounts of field notes on topics ranging from conversation pieces and quotes, descriptions of rituals and activities, and my own thoughts and reflections while in the field; this becoming an invaluable resource for the analysis portion of the project (Emerson 1995). The most formalized method used in this project were the semi-structured interviews with a sample of the members who have lived at, attended, or visited Magnolia Grove at some point in time.

By means of interviewing various practitioners, asking about the member's family and religious background, their views on their Buddhist practice, and how they relate to others who participate alongside them, I collected enough information to develop a picture of the identity and function of this particular religious institution. In understanding how the members of Magnolia Grove situate themselves and their life experiences, it will become clearer in the analysis portion of the thesis what boundaries are important for the people at the site.

METHODS: THE HOW AND WHY OF THE FIELD SITE

In participant observation, the researcher performs and replicates various activities, practices, and lifestyles of the group of people being studied (Bohannon and Elst 1998:24-25). The ultimate goal for participant observation is to produce what is ethnography which Lavenda and Schultz (2007:227) define as, "a scholarly work about a specific way of life...[in order to] explore a particular problem of importance...from the perspective of the people [being studied]." Participant observation is one of the main methods I used to retrieve analyzable data about the people and activities of the Magnolia Grove monastery.

“Doing ethnography”, as famed anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973:6-7) puts it, involves writing what is known as “thick description”. Thick description, as the name implies, involves documenting everything from the conversations shared by the researcher and the informants and conversations shared between informants in the field, to the researcher's personal experiences, feelings, and thoughts. Documenting everything in the greatest detail possible allows the researcher to produce a robust and thoroughly holistic analysis of their time spent in the field.

To me, part of thick description includes documenting as much about the researcher's life as well as the lives of the informants studied. This is why I include my own personal accounts of what happened to me while at Magnolia Grove throughout this work. This is important because it gives the context of how much I participated, what I observed, and the “amount of emotional involvement” I brought into the field which influences the types of data I am able to draw from for my analysis (Dewalt and Dewalt 2002:24). By laying out both my stories and the stories of my informants, social scientists and scholars who use similar methods will also have a sense of what it will be like when they enter the field themselves, thus “demystifying the process of doing ethnography” (Dewalt and Dewalt 2002:24).

In my own fieldwork experience, I took thorough notes on the activities I participated in, the interactions I noticed while observing my informants and others who came to the site, and my own thoughts and emotions while in the field. While I cannot assume my informants felt a particular way with complete assurance, it is only by documenting all of these things in tandem with one another that meaningful patterns about life at Magnolia Grove will emerge.

I also conducted a series of semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview consists of an interview that is guided through the use of a set of questions that my advisor and I agreed upon before entering the field. The interview guide is included as an appendix this thesis, and it provides an important baseline for the types of answers I received from my

informants (see Appendix A). A semi-structured interview allows a degree of flexibility for the researcher and the interviewee in that the interview is not restricted to the questions on the guide. If an informant was particularly interested in a certain topic from my basic questions, I went along with the flow of the conversation, and asked questions that interested them instead of asking the next question on the interview guide.

Using a semi-structured interview rather than a questionnaire was deemed more useful for procuring the type and kind of information needed to understand and analyze the field site, its actors, and meaningful events. By talking with my informants and recording their responses, I was able to receive valuable information that I might otherwise would have missed by other means by allowing the flow of conversation to remain casual but purposeful. “Interview research” is useful in anthropology and other related social sciences because the interviewees are considered major “sources of ethnographic knowledge” (Johnson and Sackett 1998:301-302). Therefore, it is a combination of interviews and participant observation which “places the ethnographer at the scene” where thick description and robust ethnographic data is obtainable.

In addition to obtaining the informants' life stories and experiences through interviews, thick description is also utilized for the field site as well. In describing the type of scene from the people involved to the natural surroundings and buildings, thick description adds a layer of dimension to the context of the research.

I focused my attention on Magnolia Grove due to: 1) location (it is the only Mindfulness Practice Center in the Plum Village Tradition in the South), 2) it is an active monastery with resident monastics living on the grounds throughout the year (unlike Buddhist temples that have been studied in the past that may not necessarily have full-time resident monastics), 3) positionality: it is considered a religious retreat center as it is highly secluded within a rural area and is separated from the larger local community. Taking all of

these qualities into account, I chose Magnolia Grove to be an aptly-suited site to provide answers to the questions posed earlier about identity, function, and localization processes.

Location is important when a researcher considers different field sites for their studies. Depending on personal and professional interests and strengths, it is important that researchers pick the best site to effectively answer the questions posed by their project to ensure accurate, valuable, and useful information. It is unproductive to use valuable research time in the field only to find out later that the data collected does not lend itself to answering the questions asked. Within anthropology, the location of the study and the subsequent fieldwork associated with a particular site by means of participant observation is what some scholars view as the distinguishing feature of the discipline (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:2). Using Magnolia Grove as the site for this project is useful because I have a personal interest in religions, and specifically, in how people use religion and religious practices to make sense of themselves and their surroundings.

Another reason why I decided upon Magnolia Grove as a research site is due to the fact that it is not considered a Buddhist temple, but is rather considered a monastery and rural retreat center. According to the Magnolia Grove website, although there are several meditation and Buddhist centers ascribing to Thích Nhất Hạnh's interpretation of Buddhism, there are only three that are formally recognized as Mindfulness Practice Meditation Centers, all of which include resident monastics. Besides Magnolia Grove in Mississippi, the other two "Mindfulness" practice meditation centers are California's Deer Park Monastery and New York's Blue Cliff Monastery. Of the three institutions founded under the this tradition, Magnolia Grove is situated in what can be considered the most rural and secluded institution.² This has the potential to be important in future comparative research in that,

2 . Magnolia Grove is also known as Magnolia Village, and along with Deer Park and Blue Cliff Monasteries located in the US, are part of a larger international collection of Mindfulness Practice Centers known as the "Plum Village Tradition".

unlike Deer Park and Blue Cliff which situated in larger, urban areas, Magnolia Grove seems to be more of a secluded retreat center. This could affect how scholars approach Buddhist institutions created and organized in the South, and give researchers added diversity to consider when analyzing Buddhism in the United States.

“BUT, I BET YOU ALREADY KNEW THAT”: BIASES AND LIMITATIONS

As with any kind of research involving the human element, there are limitations and biases that must be accounted for in order to present and analyze findings in the most transparent and reflexive way possible. It is imperative to the study of anthropology and those performing ethnographic research to fully realize and understand how the researcher affects those they come into contact with, what is their position within the community they study, and the inevitable limitations that frame the data collection and analysis portions of their research. Putting it simply, concerns inherently arise from such factors as gender, ethnicity, class, and marital status because it affects the position of the researcher within the field.

There are several elements that inherently shape the position of the researcher in the field. A single, white, upper-class male will have a different experience while conducting research than an older, married woman in the same situation, and it is up to the individual to account for such differences when analyzing data. Personally, I am a young, middle class, married woman whose husband also follows a form of Buddhism. These things all affect how I am seen and perceived at the monastery. An example of this would be how people, both lay members and monastics, seemed to think I knew a lot more about Buddhism since I am married to a Buddhist man from Malaysia than someone who does not have personal connections with the tradition. When I would ask some of the monastics or lay members about certain aspects of Buddhism, I have heard something similar to the phrase, “But, I bet you already knew that” when referencing the fact that my husband is also Buddhist, and

therefore, must have shared his religious background and experiences with me.

Being a young, married woman also proved to be a defining element of my own identity while visiting the monastery, and while interacting with its members. Since I have the visible symbol of my marriage in the form of a wedding band on my left ring finger, several of my informants asked me a myriad of questions concerning my married life. Although I tried to refrain from speaking too frankly or too often about my husband or my marriage to people I did not know well, oftentimes these subjects were the first to be brought up in my interactions with my informants.

One nun in particular, Anh, began our relationship by asking me questions like, “Are you happy in your marriage?”, “How well do you get along with your husband? Does he love you?” in a casual conversation while the two of us sat outside bending metal wire as a way to help out with things that needed to be done to complete the large bell tower that was currently under construction at the time. I was taken aback for a moment, and I struggled with how to answer such personal questions about my life when we had just met. I opted for answering vaguely as I did not feel the need to over-share about myself at this point. What I had originally thought was an isolated incident with a particular person in this situation turned out to be somewhat of a common occurrence throughout my time in the field.

Another similar situation occurred one late evening while I was helping three nuns making incense candles to burn the next day. Once I had gotten the hang of making the small mounds of incense needed to make the candles, the sisters turned their attention to inquiring about my life and how I came to be interested in Buddhism and, in particular, the practice of “Mindfulness”. Once the general questions about what I did in school and how old I was were answered, the topic of conversation turned quite suddenly when one of the elder nuns inquired, “So, how many kids do you have?”

When I said I had none, she continued with, “Oh, is there something wrong? Can you

not have kids?” When I answered that there was nothing physically wrong with me, but that we just didn't have any children, the elder nun then wanted to know if I had any intention of becoming a monastic because I was childless. Needless to say, I was surprised by the sudden frankness of the conversation, and felt that the sole aspect of my identity was centered on my husband and my marriage.

I was in no way insulted or angry at this exchange or at similar conversations of this nature because I am, after all, a married woman of several years with no kids. Perhaps, such inquiries were made simply out of genuine concern or curiosity about someone like me. So while I had initially intended to present myself mainly as an anthropologist and a scholar, I oftentimes felt like I was a married woman first, and a scholar second.

What the two examples above illustrate is that my position as a married woman in the field affected how my informants viewed me and my position in relation to the people there. Informal conversations were often geared toward my feelings about children, what my husband did for a living, and even how much money he earned per year. The nuns, in particular, were often the most curious about these topics, which I thought was surprising.

But, when I happened to talk to the English teacher that gave language lessons to the monastics a couple of times a week during one of my visits, she informed me that people “like me” (which I took to mean a young, married woman in the context of the conversation) are basically the main access to the culture of the surrounding area since many of the monastics do not venture outside of the grounds. These nuns know about the culture of the United States through news shows and radio broadcasts. So, when someone visits the monastery that is similar to them in terms of age and gender, they tend to be curious about that person's life.

Therefore, while I cannot speak directly for these people and how they “really” perceived my presence there, I can only analyze my own experience based on personal

interactions and numerous formal and informal conversations I have had with informants in the field. It is through the methods of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and casual conversations that grant me access to resources to write a rich and meaningful ethnography based on the lives of the people at Magnolia Grove as well as based on my own experiences in the field. Ultimately, doing qualitative analyses using the tools mentioned not only shed light on my informants, but also on myself as well as a researcher and anthropologist.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION OPPORTUNITIES: THE FIRST CONTACT

I visited the monastery from October 2012-April 2013 to do participant observation and interviews as necessary to conduct my research. There were several retreats and events throughout the year that I was able to participate when time and finances permitted. In total, I have gone to two retreats, one geared towards university students and the other a Holiday Retreat. I have also completed an intensive “two-week general stay”, and several Sundays during the monastery's scheduled “Days of Mindfulness”. Also, one of the Sundays I visited the site fell during what is known generally as the “Lunar New Year” celebration, or *Tết* in Vietnamese, which is the holiday representing a new year and the coming of spring.

I did extensive observations during October and November with many of my interviews done during December and January. Every time I visited Magnolia Grove, I participated in whatever activity was scheduled for that day as they have daily planned activities for the monastics from early morning meditations to “Working Meditation” which involves completing maintenance tasks around the monastery or helping out with various construction projects. All of these opportunities to participate and study in the field formed a major foundation of this thesis.

As mentioned previously, a large aspect of this project stems from the method of

participant observation. Before I decided on Magnolia Grove as the research site, I felt it necessary to make contact with the members of the community to ask their permission to study there, and to gauge their willingness to have an ethnographer in their midsts. Making that first attempt at a relationship with the members of the monastery would help to establish rapport with my informants, and so it was of the utmost importance that I be as open and honest about who I was and why I wished to study there. Fortunately with the advent of technology, it was relatively simple to find the Magnolia Grove website along with the main office e-mail address.

Therefore, my first interaction with the members of Magnolia Grove was through e-mail. I introduced myself to the community, told them about my research, and asked their permission to visit the site. It did not take long until I received a warm response from one of the resident monastics, expressing interest in my work, and their willingness to help me out with my project. I hastened to schedule a first visit to get a glimpse at the people involved with the site to see if my initial thoughts would be worth pursuing by using Magnolia Grove as my research site. After calling the monastery several times within the next few days (the monastics run the office area during the week, but due to their busy daily schedules, calls were often directed to an answering machine, and attended to later in the day when no activities were scheduled), I got in touch with one of the resident nuns who suggested I visit Magnolia Grove during the coming Sunday. This would be my first entry into the site.

My first visit to Magnolia Grove was on that chilly Sunday I wrote about in the introduction chapter. After being dropped off “in the field”, I made my way over the short distance to the covered veranda situated next to the community's parking space. Being more than a little apprehensive and nervous, one of the nuns greeted me kindly by bowing with her palms placed together and asking my name. I told her I had spoken to one of the nuns at the

monastery over the phone and in e-mails, and that I had been informed that the *sangha*³ had indeed been expecting me.

During my first visit, I was able to participate in a typical Sunday Buddhist service held at Magnolia Grove, including sitting on traditional Japanese zen mats on the floor, listening to a Dharma Talk held entirely in Vietnamese (with simultaneous English translation provided by one of the resident nuns), ritualized Dharma discussion, and eating a vegan lunch in “Mindful Silence.” The “Dharma Talk” consisted of members seated cross-legged on the same mats on the floor, all facing the front of the building known as the Meditation Hall. Several monastics situated themselves in a single line on a small raised stage that was covered in brown cotton linens and decorated with flowers and fruit. The platform was placed before the “Dharma Talk” began as it was not a permanent fixture in the tight space.

While sitting in front of the practitioners, the monastics talked on subjects regarding how members are able to practice “Mindfulness” in their daily lives, which an emphasis on how one deals with anger or other such delicate emotions in life. The main theme of this Dharma talk centered on “returning to one's breath” which is the foundation of Thích Nhất Hạnh's practice.

Based on my field notes on this talk, “returning to one's breath” means to slow down one's thought processes by consciously recognizing the constant acts of inhaling and exhaling within the body. By doing this, one is able to calm emotions that arise within one's mind or thought processes. It is not about the suppression or rejection of negative or unwanted emotions, but rather, focusing on one's breath calms the mind in such a way as to look deeply into the cause or root of the emotion, and thus, dissipating its power over the one who is feeling such emotions. It is an important aspect of Thích Nhất Hạnh's “Mindfulness Practice”

3 *Sangha* is a Sanskrit and Pali Buddhist term literally meaning “group”, “assembly”, or “association”, and includes monastics and lay-persons similar to the Christian term “congregation.”

to alleviate the the burden that stress, anger, and other negative emotions have on one's mind and by extension, alleviating “attachments” to such emotions which lead to suffering. At the most basic level, the practice of “Mindfulness” is applicable to everyone because every living being has the capacity to breathe. Therefore, even at my first visit, I became acquainted with “Mindful Living.”

RETREAT FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND THE “GENERAL-STAY”

After my first visit which occurred on a Sunday during what is known as a “Day of Mindfulness”, I deemed it necessary to participate in a longer stay at the monastery to understand the daily activities its members undertake apart from formal Sunday services which are open to the public. After consulting the monastics at Magnolia Grove via e-mail, they recommended that I participate in what they called a “2-week intensive general stay”. Magnolia Grove holds retreats geared for specific audiences or for specific times of the year in which there are planned activities for a larger group of people. But besides going on planned retreats, lay members are also encouraged to participate alongside the monastic community in what they term “general stays”. If someone wishes to stay more than two full weeks at the monastery, a letter of permission must be submitted to the head monk or nun, and the community will review the letter of intent and make a decision based on how well that person fits in with everyone. Both general stays and retreat programs are means of generating income for the monastery and it’s residents.

The monastics suggested a particular weekend for me to begin my stay as they had a planned retreat for college students and their professor from the University of Southern Mississippi, and I happily obliged. Therefore, the first Friday through Sunday I was considered a retreat member alongside approximately 14 college students and their professor. These students belonged to a Buddhism class at their university, and their professor had

visited Magnolia Grove several times previously in the course of his own academic career.

Having my first retreat experience alongside other university students around my own age and educational background proved beneficial, and I found myself learning alongside the class. Having a fellow scholar there who understood what I was researching helped to ease my nervousness. In other words, having the professor at the monastery for the weekend provided me a mentor of sorts who helped me with any potential questions I had during the first few days of immersing myself into the field.

There was a series of planned activities during the weekend retreat for the university students geared toward dealing with the stresses and difficulties of college life, and how to deal with things such as relationships and anger that arise in daily life. The monastics offered talks to the university students, and they were also put into groups to share their opinions and feelings about the retreat. Other activities such as “Deep Relaxation” offered students the chance to lie down, and enjoy a guided meditation geared towards getting participants to relax or drift off into sleep.

My two week stay gave me ample opportunities to observe the monastics and active members who live and visit the monastery. During the first week, I was advised by the elder monk to just “get a feel for the practice [of Mindfulness]”, so I collected many of my interviews after the first week.

Thus, during the second week, I began collecting interviews from monastics and lay practitioners alike. Also, I felt more comfortable with the strict routine of daily activities at the site. The monastics also included me more in their day-to-day chores such as working in the garden or making tofu or soy-based dishes for the evening meals. After my two weeks were through, I had collected half of my interviews as well as gained some new informants during this time.

“THE MUDDY RETREAT” AND THE LUNAR NEW YEAR CELEBRATION

From December 28, 2012 through January 1, 2013, I participated in a scheduled Holiday Retreat at the monastery. After e-mailing the monastery, I was able to receive a discount of 100USD to cover half of the cost for this particular retreat. For a general stay The “Holiday Retreat” was a chance to celebrate the coming of the New Year with the community, and had over 100 retreatants present. Most were non-Vietnamese lay practitioners, spiritualists, and Buddhist ranging for children under twelve to men and women in their sixties. The other sizable group included Vietnamese practitioners and their families with the youngest Vietnamese also under twelve and the oldest ones in their forties and fifties. During the retreat, there were many activities and special events structuring our time there, so it was an excellent opportunity to observe a large number of visitors to the monastery.

I also conducted several interviews during this time, although free time was scarce. This retreat was memorable for me in that it had the most non-Vietnamese visitors to the site as well as it incorporated elements from Christmas with a Christmas tree, presents, and even a nativity scene placed within the meditation hall. Magnolia Grove had been transformed into a festive and spirited place with something for everyone to relate to from the Christmas tree to offering incense and thanks to our “physical and spiritual ancestors” during an activity performed on New Year's Eve.

The weather, however, was not at all in the “holiday” spirit as it was cold, rainy, and overcast. As one retreatant put it while walking back to our assigned rooms one evening, “This will forever be known to me as the 'Muddy Retreat'.” The weather was most notable when waking up for the early morning meditation as the ground would still be frozen, and during “Walking Meditation”, I found it difficult to clear my head so I could “walk mindfully.” Instead of “bringing my thoughts to my feet” in order to do the “Walking

Meditation” as it was instructed to us, I found myself constantly thinking about how I couldn't wait to get inside a building with central heating. But, as this retreat took place over the New Year's holiday, I shared this experience with about 100 other retreatants.

As there were a lot of people present during the “Holiday Retreat”, we were grouped together into various “families” for “Dharma Sharing” activities as well as “Working Meditation” activities. Magnolia Grove grouped the “families” according to age, and I was placed in what was known as the “Young Adults.” There was also a group for the older, non-Vietnamese adults, the Vietnamese adults, the teens, and the children's group.

During the “Holiday Retreat”, there were various ritualized activities that were performed to help bring in the new year. Retreatants chanted, bowed, and performed specific recitations for New Year's Eve. We also burned our New Year's resolutions in a fire pit while popping fireworks. I will discuss this retreat in greater detail in the next chapter, but generally, the “Holiday Retreat” was a mixture of a Christmas celebration as well as a Buddhist and ethnic event celebrating Vietnamese culture.

The last formalized event I participated in at Magnolia Grove was what is commonly referred to as the “Lunar New Year”. The Lunar New Year is a celebration often taking place over the course of several days and is based on the lunar calendar brought to Vietnam and other Asian countries through cultural influences by the Chinese (Le 2013). Although specifics of the celebration vary from country to country, the Lunar New Year often involves eating special foods, visiting family to wish them good fortune in the coming year, and paying homage to one's ancestors and relatives who have passed away. It is also customary for the older, married generation to hand out little red packets with brightly colored decorations stamped onto the front which contain money for the younger, unmarried members of the family or gathering.

INFORMANTS AND INTERVIEWS

Having conducted a series of semi-structured interviews during an extended period of living in the monastery, I group together several sets of people along commonalities. The first group consists of ethnic Vietnamese monastics, the second group the immigrant Vietnamese and Vietnamese-Americans who are now permanent residents or citizens of the United States who are members of the congregation. Within the group of Vietnamese and Vietnamese-Americans are those who have grown up in Mississippi and the surrounding areas for some, if not all of their lives. The last group I consider is the “Western Lay-Friends” group: a term used by the monastics and ethnic Vietnamese lay members of Magnolia Grove for anyone who practiced at the center for any length of time, but whose family’s ethnic and religious background did not involve Buddhism in any way.

I have on record a total of eighteen interviews with people from Magnolia Grove: 5 monastics, and 6 “Western Lay-Friends”, and 7 Vietnamese and Vietnamese-Americans. The majority of the interviews were conducted face-to-face while the informant and I were at Magnolia Grove. The shortest interview lasted approximately fifteen minutes in length, and the longest lasted a little over an hour. On average, the interviews lasted for thirty minutes, but the time constraints faced especially during retreat events sometimes made it difficult to procure an intensive, uninterrupted, recorded interview. If I felt that a particular interview was too short, or did not cover relevant topics in the allotted time, I supplemented the semi-structured interview with more informal interactions and conversations. Because this was not always possible, I interviewed more people than I originally anticipated when beginning this project. In this way, I gathered the quality and quantity of material necessary to produce analyzable data.

In this section, I present background information on the informants interviewed. As is required by IRB standards, I have given everyone pseudonyms so that they remain

anonymous, and have their identity protected. I will discuss different elements of my informants's lives as it sets the ethnographic data and analysis in context. I will first discuss the members of the monastics that I interviewed, then the Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American lay members and retreat participants. Lastly, I will discuss the non-Vietnamese lay practitioners and retreat members.

The monastics I interviewed for this project range in age from those in their mid-twenties to one particular monastic being in her early forties. The monastics at the monastery numbered thirty-two during my first two-week stay, but that number has since fluctuated due to several monks and nuns rotating to other monasteries in places like Thailand as is needed. After several monks and nuns left the monastery to live in other practice centers over the world, other monks and nuns arrived at Magnolia Grove later in the year as well, thus keeping the monastic population around forty members in total. I noted also that the majority of the monastics at Magnolia Grove are under the age of forty, with one of the eldest monastic being the woman I interviewed at the time. I was not given an official reason as to why most of the monastics are under a certain age, and the demographic distribution of monastics may be due to coincidence rather than design.

Also, it is important to note the differences in language competency among the monastics in particular. Three of the monastics I interviewed completed the activity in the presence of one or more other monastics who would offer translations and interpretations for the interviewee if they felt that need to describe a scenario or idea in their native language of Vietnamese rather than in English. This is an important element to consider when performing the analysis portion of the thesis as bilingual interviews run the risk of misinterpretation if the researcher is not familiar with the second language spoken during fieldwork. As I have mentioned previously when referring to inherent biases of the researcher and the research project, I did not have any previous exposure to the Vietnamese language before coming into

contact with Magnolia Grove. While I did try my best to learn essential phrases and pronunciations used by the practitioners at the monastery, there is always a possibility of misunderstanding from a linguistic perspective when the researcher does not have the knowledge to seamlessly switch from one language to another in the course of a conversation, or code-switch, as the informants tended to be able to do on a daily basis.

Limitations aside, this chapter is divided into several sections based upon my interviews and field work at Magnolia Grove. I will first detail the eldest monk and nun, Brother Bão and Sister Hója, as I had the opportunity to interview them the longest out of the other monastics. They are also considered the lead monastics at Magnolia Grove, so I believe it important to write about their opinions and backgrounds apart from the other monastics. Afterwards, I will move on to the younger monastics I interviewed, Brother Minh, Sister Anh, and Sister Cam. The interviews with Brother Minh and Sister Anh was conducted in the presence of other monastics as they needed a translator to help in case they wished to speak in Vietnamese. Also, both of them expressed the desire to do the interviews in a group setting as they felt more comfortable surrounded by their fellow monastics. With the exception of Sister Cam, these interviews tended to be shorter on average than any of my other interviews, and was most likely due to the monastics being nervous while also performing the interview amongst a group of their peers. The monastics were not the only people I interviewed at Magnolia Grove, however.

Next, I will move on to my second group of interviewees. As mentioned previously, I have also interviewed Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American lay members, retreatants, and visitors to Magnolia Grove. This group of interviews tended to be longer with an average time spent around 30-45 minutes in length, and all of them were done completely in English. As many of the Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American people I interviewed were close to my own age, I felt that the interviews took on a more relaxed and conversational feel, especially

with Jane and Leah as I sympathized with their struggles in maintaining their social and private lives with their college life. The people I interviewed from this group contained a mixture of regular practitioners at Magnolia Grove as well as retreatants visiting the site during a particular time.

The last group of interviews I did involves what the monastics called “Western Lay-Friends”, or any lay practitioner who was not ethnically Vietnamese. This group contains both men and women, and all of the interviews were done face-to-face except one where I used a mixture of e-mails and informal conversations with an informant due to time constraints. This group of interviewees had the most diverse views in how they approached “Mindfulness” in their lives, and how they viewed the practice in regards to the Buddhist religion. The interviews varied in terms of length, the shortest interview of this group was just under 20 minutes, while the longest interview was over an hour.

ELDER BROTHER, ELDER SISTER: BR. BAO AND SR. HUA

The first monastic I interviewed while on my two-week stay at Magnolia Grove was a man by the name of Brother Bảo (henceforth abbreviated to Br. Bảo) . Standing a bit taller than the other monks in the community, Br. Bảo is considered one of the head, elder monks, although he is only in his late thirties. Having a constant air of quiet authority, Bảo often gave Dharma Talks to his fellow brothers, sisters, and “Lay-Friends” as he and the other practitioners often called the non-monastic members at Magnolia Grove. Not only does he often lead Dharma Talks for the community, but he oftentimes plays a central role in the rituals performed during the “Days of Mindfulness.”

Another important role Br. Bảo had was that of a liaison of sorts between non-Buddhists, members of other faiths, and the practitioners that attend Magnolia Grove. He is proficient in English, more so than some of the other monastics, and he is an elder monk in

terms of rank, so when newspapers, reporters or scholars such as myself seek more information about Magnolia Grove and its activities, Br. Bảo, whether by conscious choice or power of authority, is usually one of the first monastics to be consulted. Because Br. Bảo had done interviews for the media and other scholars in the past, he was familiar with the activities associated with and required of him during the interview process such as having to sign a confidentiality form, and having his answers recorded and transcribed by the interviewer.

When I had informed the monastery of my intention to interview several of the residential monks and nuns at Magnolia Grove, I was directed to seek a semi-formal permission from the “elder brother and elder sister” to carry out the rest of my interviews and necessary fieldwork. This meant having to talk to Br. Bảo and Sister Hóa (abbreviated to Sr. Hóa) who is an older nun I also had the chance to interview.

I used the term “semi-formal” in this context because there is a formal ceremony that is performed for several specific occasions, and involves the entire monastic community coming together in the meditation hall, performing chants, and reciting a specific dialogue used to ritualistically display the community's acknowledgement of an event. Two such events and occasions that were made known to me required this formalized procedure includes times when new monastics wish to come to Magnolia Grove to live there for an extended period of time as was the case during the monastery's three month “Winter Retreat” held for the monks and nuns, and when a lay member wanted to stay at Magnolia for more than two weeks.

In both these instances, although the entire community discusses the prospect of having an added member living amongst them, the responsibility for making the decision whether someone is allowed to stay depends upon the monastics that correspond to the asking party's gender. So, if a woman such as myself would have wanted to live at the monastery for

months at a time, for instance, the ceremony of presenting myself and asking for such permission would have been done in the nun's meditation hall (a smaller meditation hall built into the nun's residence where they perform morning and evening meditation, only joining the men in the larger hall during special occasions or during retreats.)

Br. Bảo, as with any of the other brothers and sisters at the Buddhist monastery, wore monastic robes generally consisting of an all-brown ensemble with matching dark shoes as their everyday wear, and a bright golden sash tied around the left shoulder for formal events or ceremonies. During our interview, he wore his daily robes as we sat together one evening after the day's activities were completed. Due to the rules in regards to women and men at Magnolia Grove, I always had to be in the presence of a nun or a group of people when interviewing a member of the opposite sex.

Therefore, Sr. Hója, the senior nun at Magnolia Grove, was also present when I interviewed Br. Bảo. The three of us sat outside one evening at the ping-pong table underneath the veranda. Sr. Hója and Br. Bảo had brought out cups of hot tea for us to sip on during the interview which made for a pleasant scene, although I remember the mosquitoes being particularly bad for that time of year. Before we began the interview, all three of us took deep, relaxing breaths to “return to the present moment”, and to not let feelings of nervousness or anxiety overwhelm us. During this time, the hourly clock bells and the evening bells resounded throughout our interview which caused everyone to stop what they were doing and just breathe silently until the bells stopped.

In total, the interview lasted just over 45 minutes, and was conducted entirely in English. Br. Bảo answered the questions with little hesitation, and almost always took a pause or a deep breath to contemplate his thoughts before giving an answer. There was nothing in his mannerisms that outwardly indicated he was nervous, and when he wasn't sipping on tea while answering questions, Br. Bảo would be sitting calmly and relaxed with

his hands folded in his lap. I instantly got the impression that it was no wonder Br. Bảo was looked up to as a role model for “Mindfulness” at Magnolia Grove as he consistently answered only after reflecting his own thoughts.

Br. Bảo ordained as a novice monk in February 2001, and has therefore been a monastic for twelve years to date. He is the eldest of three brothers, and he and his family came to America in 1989 when he was thirteen years old. They moved to Los Angeles, California, where Br. Bảo learned about Thích Nhất Hạnh and his approach to Buddhism when he was eighteen years old. Originally, Br. Bảo had told me, his family practiced another kind of Buddhism where they would “just go to [the] temple, and chant” when they were still in Vietnam. But, after coming to the United States, Br. Bảo said that his mother was the first to become “very inspired” by Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings.

Our interview focused on Br. Bảo's life, and what the Thích Nhất Hạnh approach meant for him in terms of his own personal growth, and the spiritual and emotional benefits he received since practicing in such a way. For him, practicing in this tradition helped him to understand how to be “in the present moment”, and he told me also helped him to appreciate the love his mother had bestowed upon him and his siblings. But as Br. Bảo had also stayed at another main Thích Nhất Hạnh practice center, Blue Cliff in New York, I also asked him about his experiences there.

After discussing these experiences, we expanded our conversation to how Magnolia Grove interacts with the local community of Batesville, the state, and the region. After consulting with Sr. Hóa, Br. Bảo talked about the number of high school students, university students, and researchers from Oxford, Mississippi, and the surrounding areas who have visited the monastery out of intellectual curiosity or as a part of a school project. Magnolia Grove also has visited schools, rotary club meetings, nursing homes, and churches around Batesville because, as Br. Bảo said, “the local people [and the] neighborhood [are] very

important.” And, while Sr. Hója was present during this interview, she remained mostly stoic and quiet throughout the process unless Br. Bảo asked for confirmation of facts or dates.

Sr. Hója is an older, quiet nun who tries her best to smile every day as people have commented she can be “too serious” at times. My first impression of Sr. Hója was that she was an authority figure for the monastics and lay members at Magnolia Grove, and I was somewhat reluctant to talk to her informally for fear I would say or do something undignified. But after having our formal interview, I feel that Sr. Hója is a very kind, gentle, and interesting woman who had lived a hard life growing up in Vietnam before becoming a monastic.

Our formal interview took place a few days after Br. Bảo's interview, lasted 43 minutes, and was done completely in English. The sun was warm that day, so we decided to hold the interview on the second-story porch of the nun's dormitory house. Sr. Hója led a breathing exercise for us so that we could “return to our breath”, calm down, and not get nervous during the interview. Mainly, our interview focused on her life growing up in Vietnam, how she became a monastic, and how she felt about “Mindfulness” in general.

Sr. Hója is from the central Vietnam where she and her family lived until 1993. That year, her family migrated to Houston, Texas, and in 1995, Sr. Hója had a chance to visit Thích Nhất Hạnh's main practice center, Plum Village, in France. After coming home from her trip, Sr. Hója then asked her parents for their permission to become a monastic. They agreed, and Sr. Hója was ordained in June of 1996. After ordaining as a nun, Sr. Hója moved around to different practice centers and Vietnamese temples in the United States before settling back in Vietnam for a time.

But, due to the uneasiness with which the Vietnamese government deals with Thích Nhất Hạnh's message and stance on political issues, Sr. Hója left Vietnam in 2009, and went back to Plum Village. She was once again uprooted from the main center, and asked to go to Magnolia Grove to help with building up the monastic community there which is how Sr.

Hóa ended up in Mississippi in 2010. Although constantly faced with hardships throughout her life, Sr. Hóa found solace in “Mindful Living.”

In addition to constantly moving around, Sr. Hóa and her family migrated to the United States as refugees. Her father worked for the U.S. government during the Vietnam War, and was captured by the Vietnamese communists. He was jailed until the United States government liberated him, and gave him a job so that he and his family could move safely out of their home country. It was through Thích Nhất Hạnh and his message that Sr. Hóa was able to cope with the difficulties and hardships of her life. Having “Mindfulness” practices as a dealing mechanism was an opinion shared by some of the younger monastics as well.

YOUNGER BROTHER, YOUNGER SISTERS: BR. MINH, SR. ANH, AND SR. CAM

In general, the younger monastics at Magnolia Grove are not from the United States originally, but have been living in the country for the past few years. They are not permanent residents of Magnolia Grove, but rather move to various other Thích Nhất Hạnh practice centers across the United States or in other countries such as France or Thailand. The younger male monastics and I did not have many chances to talk informally due to the fact that men and women only interact in groups. Plus, the younger monastics generally did not feel as comfortable speaking to me in English which was evident in our formal interviews as well. Therefore, while I was able to supplement my formal interviews with interactions and conversations with the nuns I interviewed, I did not have the chance to do the same thing with Brother Minh.

Brother Minh and Sister Anh are two of the younger monastics I interviewed while at Magnolia Grove. Both monastics are in their twenties, with Br. Minh being 29 and Sr. Anh being 25. I conducted their interviews consecutively one afternoon during the free time period while I was staying at the monastery for two weeks. One of the older nuns acted as an

interpreter for these interviews as they felt more comfortable to switch into Vietnamese if they did not know how to fully express their opinions in English.

Br. Minh is a monk from northern Vietnam whom I saw during my two week stay as well as during the “Holiday Retreat”, but left to go to another monastery shortly afterwards. He was ordained as a monk in 2005, and during my field work, I witnessed him and some of the other monastics give “question and answer” panels during retreats and Sundays for visitors. But, Br. Minh was rather hesitant in answering my questions, and answered many of his questions in Vietnamese rather than in English. This, in my opinion, made this interview one of the tougher ones for me to do as an ethnographer because I had to heavily rely on a translator to conduct the interview.

The interviews were held in the main dining room adjacent to the meditation hall with Sr. Anh being the one I interviewed right after Br. Minh. Sr. Anh is a young, soft-spoken monastic who was ordained as a nun in 2006. She was very shy during our interview, and showed her nervousness by giggling and apologizing for her “bad English”, as she told me one day during a casual conversation. She may have had a difficult time answering the questions during the formal interview because there was a group of monastics listening in on her responses. Mainly during the formal interview, we discussed “Mindfulness” practices in general, and what her life as a monastic was like. I was able to have several deeper conversations with Sr. Anh outside of the structured setting of the interview. But, whereas Br. Minh and Sr. Anh seemed shy and restrained in their responses, Sr. Cam tended to express her views and opinions much more freely.

Sr. Cam is a nun who grew up in Tennessee, and is fluent in both English and Vietnamese. She has a melodic voice, and is easily relatable due to the fact that she is young, charismatic, and always seems to have a story to tell. She gets along well with the young adults and teenagers who come to Magnolia Grove during retreats and special events, so Sr.

Cam is often asked to give talks to these groups or lead them in discussions or “Dharma Sharing” activities. When I came to Magnolia Grove during my two-week stay, Sr. Cam was one of the first monastics I spoke to for an extended period of time.

Our formal interview took place one week into my two-week stay at the monastery, and was conducted in my dormitory room after evening meditation. The interview lasted for about 55 minutes, but we also talked before and after the recorder was shut off. We sat down on the floor, and poured ourselves some hot tea. Before I even had a chance to turn the recorder on, Sr. Cam said to me to just think of this activity as a “talk between two friends” rather than a strict interview of questions and answers. As was evident throughout our interview, Sr. Cam was an out-spoken nun whose stories about her own life experiences helped her to connect to visitors, lay members, and monastics alike.

Sr. Cam and I talked about many topics ranging from “Mindfulness” practices in daily life to her opinions on how others view Magnolia Grove, the monastics, and Buddhism. When I asked Sr. Cam about what advice she would give to a non-Buddhist who visited Magnolia Grove, she commented that people should “not come here with any sort of expectation” of what they would find at the monastery. Sr. Cam commented that people should not come to the monastery with a preconceived notion of a “perfect monastic.” Continuing, she stated that people sometimes assume that, “the monastics don't make mistakes, they always look peaceful, [and] they are like angels and saints. We are all on the path of practice...we are all known as practitioners.” This notion of equality between monastics and lay members was a theme in our interview. While the monastics typically talked about specific “Mindfulness” practices and activities they enjoyed doing, lay members of Magnolia Grove spoke more about how they incorporated the practices in their daily lives.

VIETNAMESE LAY MEMBERS: JANE, LEAH, KAREN, MARIAN, MAI, KIM, AND KY

Having a friendly smile and a bright personality, Jane is a young woman I had the opportunity to interview during the “Holiday Retreat”. We happened to be roommates for that particular retreat, and she was considered one of the group leaders for the “Young Adults Group” during our stay. Jane and her family often participate in retreats and activities at Magnolia Grove, and she was one of the first lay members to initiate conversations with me while I was in the field. Since we are around the same age, I found it easy for me to talk to her, and to ask her questions that I may have been too hesitant to ask to a monastic beforehand.

Jane is a student at a local university where she studies psychology. She is ethnically Vietnamese, but has lived in the United States her whole life. Jane and her family are staple members of Magnolia Grove as they were some of the founders who helped to get the monastery started. Our formal interview lasted over 40 minutes, and covered a variety of topics including her family and educational background, her experiences with the Thích Nhất Hạnh tradition, and how she incorporates the practices within her daily life. Compared to some of the other Vietnamese-Americans I interviewed while at Magnolia Grove, Jane seemed the most willing to speak with me as well as the most enthusiastic about her spirituality in that I felt the conversation flowed smoothly without me having to consult the interview guide.

As stated previously, Jane and I had several chances to speak on an informal level as her family visited Magnolia Grove every Sunday, and also attended all of the events I have gone to during my field work. Therefore, during my first Sunday in the field, Jane was one of the first people to approach me and introduce herself as well as some of the other lay members. Having someone my own age to talk to helped to make my experiences in the field experiences pleasant and less daunting. Our formal interview would not take place until a couple of months later, however.

The interview took place in the cozy dorm room she and I shared with several other girls during the “Holiday Retreat.” The weather was particularly cold that evening so the heater was on, and I sat on my bunk wrapped in a blanket while Jane took a seat next to me. By this time, I felt comfortable in her company, and she was well acquainted with my thesis work and research interests. I felt that, because I had known her longer than several of my other informants, this interview was easier for me to conduct on a friendlier level.

We discussed a variety of topics starting with her family and educational backgrounds. Jane was born in Denver, Colorado, but told me she considers herself a “Southerner” since she moved to Mississippi when she was still a child. She had graduated from a Mississippi high-school, and was about to graduate from a Mississippi university with her Bachelor's degree. She also added that she was thinking about attending graduate school in Mississippi as well. Of all the other Vietnamese-Americans I have interviewed during this process, Jane seemed to be the most keen on discussing topics relating to growing up in the South. But, other Vietnamese-Americans also touched upon similar topics as well.

Leah, like Jane, is a Vietnamese-American woman attending a Mississippi university in Jackson for her undergraduate degree in neuroscience with a double minor in psychology and business. Leah was born in Kansas, but moved to Mississippi before she turned five years old, and has been living in Mississippi ever since. Leah's family are also regular attendants at Magnolia Grove, coming almost every Sunday, and for retreats and cultural events. Even though I had seen her almost every time I visited Magnolia Grove, I did not have a chance to really get to know her until the “Holiday Retreat” where we were also roommates.

The interview lasted about 35 minutes, and took place in our dorm room during the last day of the “Holiday Retreat.” While all the other retreatants were preparing to leave shortly, Leah, Jane, and several other roommates of mine were not leaving until later on that afternoon. We talked for about ten minutes before I had asked her if this would be a good

time to do the formal interview. She agreed, but as soon as I turned on the recorder, she seemed to get nervous, and “didn't think she would be very helpful” for my research. I decided to try to alleviate her uneasiness with being recorded by not writing out notes during the interview, and by not consulting my interview guide as much as I would have normally done.

Karen is a Vietnamese woman in her late twenties who lived at Magnolia Grove with her husband and small son. Karen's husband was a key worker in helping to build the monastery's bell tower, and the construction phase of the project demanded that they stay at the monastery for several months. I often saw her during my two week stay playing with her son, or helping around the monastery. What was interesting about Karen was that she grew up in Germany, and this was her first extensive stay in the United States. So while she did speak Vietnamese to the other monastics and lay members, I observed she frequently spoke German to her son and her husband. When we did do the formal interview, the theme shifted from “Mindful Living” to her experiences and issues that have arisen since moving to the United States.

Kim was another roommate of mine during the “Holiday Retreat”, and she was also part of the “Young Adults” group that met during the retreat for chores and “Dharma Sharing” activities. She is a shy, quiet, twenty-one-year-old Vietnamese woman studying biochemistry and molecular biology in the United States. She has been living in the United States for the past five years, but when asked, Kim told me she had every intention of returning to Vietnam. To her, the biggest pressure for her in her life at that moment was to support her family by getting a job “back home.” Although we were roommates, we did not talk much outside of the “Dharma Sharing” activities in which we were part of a larger group.

Our interview was on a very windy day outside during one of our few break periods. We had 20 minutes before we had to go to lunch, therefore, our interview ended up being the

shortest at 15 minutes in total. She was reluctant to open up to me, and so I felt that this was one of my harder interviews to do. But Kim was passionate about following the path of “Mindful Living”, Thích Nhất Hạnh, and in particular, struggled with fulfilling her duties and obligations to her family and her own personal desire to become a monastic, as she told me. Kim may have been quiet, but she was also very outspoken about how she felt about Thích Nhất Hạnh's impact on her life and the lives of his practitioners.

For example, Kim explained that she thinks her parents are “atheists” although they do “worship [their] ancestors.” Not coming from a strictly religious background, Kim found out about “Mindfulness” when she and a friend of hers attended a retreat for teens at a Thích Nhất Hạnh practice center branch that was in Vietnam at the time. The retreat was given especially for teens and young adults with the theme being “To Have a Future.” Sadly, Kim told me that the monastery where the retreat was held had since been burnt down, and the brothers and sisters who lived there were forced to leave the country to live at other “Mindfulness” practice centers, including Magnolia Grove. Kim was the only one of my informants that openly referenced some of the political conflict and strife that occurred in Vietnam in regards to Thích Nhất Hạnh and the “Mindful Living” movement in recent years. I was not able to collect much information from Kim after the formal interview due to time restraints.

I also did an interview during the Lunar New Year celebration with a young woman by the name of Marian. She is an eighteen-year-old Vietnamese nursing student with long, dark hair and black glasses that frame her face. She, like several of the other Vietnamese-American women I interviewed during my field work often visits the monastery with her parents on the weekends. Being soft-spoken, Marian and I did not get a chance to have many conversations during my two-week stay, but were able to talk much more as she stayed in the same dormitory as I did during the “Holiday Retreat.” Our formal interview lasted around 25

minutes, and occurred while driving back to Oxford from Magnolia Grove.

Growing up in Clarksdale, Mississippi for most of her life, Marian is also attending a local university. She is a first-generation Vietnamese-American along with her four other sisters. Once her parents permanently moved to the United States, Marian stated that they “moved around a lot” until they settled in Mississippi when she was about 6. Our interviewed concentrated on Marian's life, and how her family practices “Mindful Living” in their daily lives.

Kỳ and Mai were two people whose interviews I conducted via e-mail and conversations. Kỳ is a young, Vietnamese-American man in his late twenties who is studying to become a math professor at the university level while Mai is a bubbly, university student attending a college in South Carolina. I met both of them during the “Holiday Retreat” where we were assigned the same “Dharma Sharing” group. Due to the limited time allowed for personal activities, I was unable to procure recorded interviews with these informants which is why I asked them for e-mail interviews.

The e-mail interviews consisted of an expanded version of my interview guide, and asked questions about their personal background, their religious and familial upbringing as well as their views on “Mindfulness”, Buddhism, and “living in the South”. I encouraged both of them to e-mail me with any questions they may have about the interview, and if I needed more clarification, both Mai and Kỳ were eager to answer me. Ultimately, lay members I interviewed were willing to talk about themselves, and how they used “Mindfulness” in their daily lives as well as how they viewed themselves in relation to the practice.

“WESTERN LAY-FRIENDS”: BETHANY, TRISTAN, B.C., BILL, VICTORIA, AND FRANK

As stated previously, the term “Western Lay-Friend” was coined by the monastics to refer to non-ethnically Asian lay members. Bethany was a woman I met while at the “Holiday Retreat.” She has blond hair, light eyes, pale skin, and a bright smile. She participated in the event alongside her husband and her two small children. Because she was older than me, she was placed in the “Adults” group, and we did not have much of a chance to speak informally at first. But, one afternoon while I was taking notes on my observations, she approached me, and inquired why she had seen me carrying around a pen and notebook with me at times. Once I had explained to her what I was researching, she was very interested in talking with me further.

Our formal interview took place on a windy day outside on one of the marble benches overlooking the trees. Her two young sons were playing nearby, so we were able to talk mostly uninterrupted. Bethany and her husband are part of a theatre group that specialized in what Bethany called “Playback.” In “Playback”, the audience is a vital part of the theatrical production in that they are encouraged to share personal life stories about themselves to the actors who then “retell” the story through improvisation. This was an important theme in our interview as Bethany iterated that “Mindfulness” practices have helped her to become better at her job as well as in daily life.

Another important issue that Bethany discussed with me was about her family and their relationship to Buddhism. Bethany and her husband were both born and raised in Christian denominations, but converted to Buddhism in their college years. Now that they have two boys, Bethany told me that she not only self-identifies as a Buddhist, but that she was also raising her family to be Buddhists as well. As I will detail in the next chapter, Bethany approaches “Mindfulness” practice as a Buddhist religion that her family follows.

Tristan is a 36-year-old, caucasian man who grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania. I met him during the retreat for university students, and he lived at Magnolia Grove for

around four months. He found out about “Mindfulness” by picking up a book one day while he was out shopping, and he said that Thích Nhất Hạnh's message “really spoke to him” in a way that other religions or ways of life had not done so previously in his life.

Our formal interview took place in the dining area at Magnolia Grove during the second week of my two-week stay and lasted 45 minutes. Tristan fidgeted a lot during our interview, and seemed quite nervous to have his answers written down and recorded, so I did my best to make the interview as conversational as possible. Once he overcame his initial nervousness, the interview proceeded quite smoothly.

We mainly talked about his life, and how he became interested in Thích Nhất Hạnh's “Mindfulness” approach. He stated that after he had read about him in several books, that he took trips to the other Thích Nhất Hạnh practice centers in the United States, Deer Park and Blue Cliff. Because he had visited the other centers, I was able to discuss with him some similarities and differences among the institutions.

In addition, we also talked about his time at Magnolia Grove, how he got along with the monastics, and how he felt about the differences in language and culture between himself and the Vietnamese practitioners. When the subject of “Vietnamese language and culture” came up, Tristan responded by shrugging his shoulders and saying, “It comes with the territory.” Tristan did not mind the “Vietnamese stuff” that went on at the monastery, but my informants did always share similar opinions. One woman in particular whispered to me during the Lunar New Year celebration that she would have “enjoyed the [talent] show much more if [she] could understand what was going on.”

B.C. is a jolly, energetic gentlemen in his fifties who teaches at a university in Mississippi. I was fortunate in that I met B.C. during the retreat for university students. In fact, he was the professor that planned the retreat for his Buddhism class, and was kind enough to answer any questions I had about Magnolia Grove since he had visited the site

multiple times in his own research. Whenever I was in doubt or needed another opinion about what I was observing during the retreat, B.C. was always there to lend me a helping hand.

Our formal interview did not happen until much later, however, at the “Holiday Retreat” on New Year's Eve. While waiting for a talent show activity to start late that evening, B.C. and I took the opportunity to sit on the floor on some of the meditation cushions to do the interview. While we did talk about his life, and how he approaches Buddhism in his daily life, it was a somewhat difficult interview to do simply because he is a fellow ethnographer who utilizes similar methods in his own research to collect data. Therefore, the theme for this interview centered more on Buddhist philosophy from a scholarly and academic perspective. B.C. offered me a unique perspective with his life in that he is a self-identified Buddhist who also studies the subject he practices.

Another mentor figure I acquired and interviewed at Magnolia Grove was a man by the name of Bill. In his fifties, Bill “retired” about five years ago, and has traveled the globe visiting Buddhist monasteries ever since. He has been staying at Magnolia Grove for the past few months, helping the monastery with chores, English classes for the monastics, construction projects as well as acting as an unofficial liaison for non-Vietnamese visitors. It was thanks to Bill that my two-week stay was not constantly riddled with mistakes and errors.

Bill was an easy-going man whom I found easy to talk with, and our formal interview was no different. We sat outside on a picnic table looking out at the construction site of the new meditation hall, and talked for over an hour one afternoon during our “Personal Time”. Out of all of my informants, I felt that Bill thoroughly answered all of my questions without me having to refer to my interview guide. We talked about his personal life, where he grew up, and what kinds of jobs he had worked at until he retired. I also asked him about how he uses “Mindfulness” in his life, and how he felt about Magnolia Grove in general. The most interesting thing about Bill was that he offered me an insight into how Magnolia Grove

changed as an institution as he had been involved with the site even before it became a monastery.

Victoria was one of my dorm mates during the “Holiday Retreat” as well as a member of my “Working Meditation” group at that time. Victoria and I talked informally several times during the retreat as we were often grouped together since we were both in our twenties. She is studying to get her PhD in the health and medical field in Florida, and she is incorporating “Mindful Living” and meditation practices into her research project which deals with mentally ill patients.

Victoria is an opinionated, confident woman who was not afraid to share her views with those around her. When we did have a formal interview, it lasted about 25 minutes, and it took place in the meditation hall in between activities at the retreat. Mainly, Victoria talked about the struggles she faced growing up with very strict parents, and how she used “Mindfulness” practices to cope with her family's involvement with drug and alcohol abuse. She made sure to “correct my wrong perception” that Buddhism was a religion. As I will detail in later chapters, Victoria saw Buddhism as a way to maintain “mental fitness”, and shunned any mention of “Mindfulness” as a “religion”, “spirituality”, or “alternate lifestyle”.

Lastly, Frank is a librarian in his thirties whom I met while also at the “Holiday Retreat.” He is very active in his Episcopal church, and before that, he was a Methodist missionary in Korea. He learned about Thích Nhất Hạnh while abroad in Korea, and Frank became passionate about being both “a good Christian, and a good Buddhist.”

Unfortunately, I was unable to get a recorded interview with Frank due to the limited time that I had during the “Holiday Retreat”, but we shared lengthy informal conversations during that time as well as messages and e-mails after the retreat. From my conversations with him, Frank seems to be an open-minded, and optimistic person, seeing the benefits of practicing multiple religious traditions without compromising his own morals and principles.

As I will detail later, Frank has several ways he meshes his Christianity with his Buddhist practice.

“NOW WHAT?”: USING THE DATA TO ANSWER THE QUESTIONS

To answer the question of form and function of Magnolia Grove, I focused on the history of Buddhism in the United States, the various sects of Buddhism found in the United States, and the representation of religion expressed in people’s daily lives (Alcoff 2006; Bender and Cadge 2006; Jones 2007; Drzewiecka et al. 2012). This will give me the information I need to analyze how Magnolia positions itself as an institution within the larger picture of Buddhism within the United States and elsewhere. By asking about the member’s family and religious background, their views on their Buddhist practice, and how they relate to others who participate alongside them, I received the information needed to develop a picture of the identity and function of this particular religious institution.

To understand the internal diversity of Magnolia Grove, I looked at who practiced Buddhism, and how Buddhism interacted with an individual’s position within the religious community and within the larger local community. If Magnolia Grove functioned as an “Ethnic Buddhist” institution, I would expect to find several elements to support this such as: 1) the ethnic makeup and historical background of the center’s members to be predominantly non-white and from areas noted for having a high percentage of practicing Buddhists such as in parts of Southeast and East Asia, 2) the institution focusing on retaining or preserving aspects of the home country’s culture such as language and cuisine, 3) the institution being used by members as a way to enhance social interactions and connections with people belonging to the same ethnic background or home country to procure such things as jobs, romantic relationships, or to form what is known as a “fictive kin [group]” (Lavenda and Schultz 2007:163), and 4) the institution hosting or promoting activities or events outside

of the realm of religion, often acting as more of a “civic center” than as a strict place of worship.

Because these are multi-faceted questions, I asked my informants various groups of questions as I carried out my research. First, I inquired about their role within the monastery and how they came to be involved with this particular type of Buddhism. Asking these questions helped me to understand if the members are attending the monastery for strictly religious benefits or for other reasons such as social connections or as a way to gain access to potential dating partners or mates.

Second, I asked about the monastery’s relationship with the outside community of Batesville as well as their feelings about being in the United States. Examples of these kinds of questions dealt with how the local people view Magnolia Grove, and what has the institution done that involves the rest of the community. This group of questions elicited the least amount of responses from my informants, so I did not try to push them to give me answers if they did not wish to discuss the matters of money and problems they may have faced while dealing with people from other religions.

III. THE “FACES OF 'MINDFULNESS'”: CONCERNS AND INTERNAL DIVERSITY
AT MAGNOLIA GROVE

People use “Mindfulness” practices at Magnolia Grove to achieve several goals within their personal or social life. How practitioners interpret the the “Mindfulness” activities, what language they prefer to use, and what motivations for practicing “Mindfulness” all reflect various concerns that members address at the site. For some, “Mindfulness” is synonymous with any other large religion such as Christianity or Islam in that the informant sees himself or herself as a practicing Buddhist. Others use the site to address other personal or group concerns that may not be religious or spiritual in nature. This chapter discusses the concerns I observed while at Magnolia Grove.

In particular, there are three prominent sets of concerns I observed: 1) how to use “Mindfulness” as part of a religious lifestyle, 2) how to use “Mindfulness” as a mechanism to “return to one's roots”, and 3) how to use “Mindfulness” to maintain what Victoria called “Mental Fitness”. Thus, different groups at the monastery use “Mindfulness” to address key concerns that make the practice meaningful to them.

These three sets of concerns roughly correspond to the groups I identified in the methods chapter. But, some of these concerns are so intertwined with one another, that it remains difficult to separate one from the other. Some of the examples discussed, for instance, can fall under multiple categories, but nevertheless, these categories of concerns are useful in understanding how practitioners approach “Mindfulness” in their life, and how they make “Mindfulness” meaningful for them.

HOW TO USE “MINDFULNESS” AS A RELIGIOUS OR SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Several of my informants shared the concern of using “Mindfulness” in a religious or

spiritual sense. What this means is that individuals like Bethany, for example, practiced “Mindfulness” alongside her husband and kids in a similar fashion as one would practice Christianity by attending a religious service, or by saying prayers at night. Bethany, and others such as the monastics at Magnolia Grove, self-identified as Buddhists when I inquired about their religious affiliation. This is important because not everyone shared the same feelings that “Mindfulness” or even Buddhism was a religion at all. These practitioners approach “Mindfulness” in a more traditional sense as they see it as a religion that one can follow.

Marian told me that they have “family dinners” in which they recite Buddhist prayers before they begin eating in a gesture of gratitude. Also, Marian stated that her parents do various meditation practices inspired by “Mindfulness” in the morning, and they also perform various practices in the evening such as chanting. For Marian, the tradition of “Mindfulness” is closely associated with her family life.

Interestingly, before her parents followed Thích Nhất Hạnh, Marian stated that her mother was a “hard-core Buddhist.” She added that her mom didn’t “practice Zen like [their family] does now”, but another tradition she wasn’t as familiar with. It was thanks to Jane’s parents that Marian found out about “Mindfulness”, and started to use the practice in her daily life. It is due to Marian’s family background that they view “Mindfulness” as the religion followed by the family.

Bethany also uses “Mindfulness” to address the concern of her children’s religious upbringing. As stated earlier, she and her family considers themselves following a Buddhist religion, and she uses the practices she has learned in her work life and in her home life. Even though her children are both under the age of 12, Bethany raises her boys to practice “Mindfulness” by including them in meditation rituals, and teaching them how to “eat mindfully.” These practices will be examined in greater detail in the next chapter.

Frank, for example, commented how he practices “Mindfulness” alongside Christianity. Frank is a devout Christian, and has even spent several years doing missionary work in Korea. This was where he originally heard about the Thích Nhất Hạnh tradition. He told me that practicing “Mindfulness” did not take away from his faith in Christianity or weaken his dedication to the faith. Rather, he explained, the practices he has learned and implemented in his daily life from “Mindfulness” has instead “made him a better Christian.” In all of these examples, the informants held concerns about how “Mindfulness” could be used in their life as a religious tradition, or in Marian's case, how “Mindfulness” impacts her life as it is her family's religion.

HOW TO USE “MINDFULNESS” AS A WAY TO GET “CLOSER TO ONE'S ROOTS”

Another concern expressed to me by several of my Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American informants was the role “Mindfulness” played in connecting with one's family or Vietnamese heritage. This concern is deeply intertwined with the first concern as some of my ethnic Vietnamese informants, such as Leah and Marian, referred to “Mindfulness” as “the family's religion.” This concern was expressed differently by other Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American informants. For instance, while Jane embraced this concern and viewed Magnolia Grove as a place to learn Vietnamese language and culture, others, like Leah, felt obligated by their parents to practice the same tradition as the rest of the family. Regardless of the outcome, Jane and Leah were two of my informants who spoke about getting closer to their Vietnamese heritage through “Mindfulness.”

To continue, the most interesting theme that kept reoccurring in Leah's interview was how she perceived herself, and how she believed others perceived her. In particular, she confessed that, “a lot of people say that I don't act very Asian at all. I'm probably the whitest Asian out of, like, my family.” When I asked her what this meant, Leah told me that she

didn't "embrace her Vietnamese culture as much as [her] parents would like." She added she was "really picky" about eating Vietnamese food (although she did say she really enjoyed the food prepared at the monastery), she didn't listen to Vietnamese music, or liked anything that could be considered strictly a "Vietnamese thing." In this regard, she told me that part of the reason for coming to Magnolia Grove at all was to make her family happy. Leah felt obligated to come to practice alongside her family, but if given the choice she would "choose not to come here [to Magnolia Grove]."

That being said, however, Leah made sure to iterate that it wasn't that Magnolia Grove was a bad place to be, or that she didn't necessarily believe in their practices. It seemed that Leah was coming to Magnolia Grove due to family pressures and perhaps guilt ever since she told her parents that she had converted to Christianity when she was still in high-school. She felt that she owed it to her parents and family to come to Magnolia Grove because "converting" (Leah made the sign for quotations in the air when she said the word herself) created a "religious wall" between her parents and herself. According to Leah, "[her] parents didn't want [her] being a Christian, and [her] family being Buddhist" because she said that, "Vietnamese culture is all about family, and we do the same thing." By going against her family's religion to become a Christian, Leah was seen as going against the people in her family as well. Now, Leah says, she has put "the whole religious thing" aside, and comes to Magnolia Grove to spend time with her family.

Karen also used "Mindfulness" as a way to connect with her Vietnamese background. Since she spent a large portion of her life in Europe, she confessed that her Vietnamese was not "as good as it should be." She confided that she found the customs and culture of the United States "confusing" at times, and mentioned instances where she did not know how to react in certain situations. Staying at Magnolia Grove with her husband and small son gave Karen an increased exposure to the Vietnamese language that she lacked while living in

Europe. For her, “Mindfulness” was seen as a familiar part of her life while she lived in a foreign country. For many of my Vietnamese informants, “Mindfulness” was seen as an extension of their ethnic heritage as they came to the site to speak Vietnamese, eat ethnic cuisine, and partake in Vietnamese cultural events.

HOW TO USE “MINDFULNESS” TO MAINTAIN “MENTAL FITNESS”

“Mental fitness” is a term Victoria used repeatedly during our interview to express her number one concern for practicing “Mindfulness.” I am adopting the phrase to describe the members and retreatants who practiced “Mindfulness” to achieve non-religious benefits such as psychological wellbeing, inner peace, or an escape from the stresses of daily life. When my informants spoke about “Mindfulness”, several of them did not want to be labeled as “Buddhists”, and preferred to speak of the practice in terms of how it helped them personally to achieve a better outlook on life.

Victoria, for example, spoke about the importance of using “Mindfulness” and meditative practices instead of conventional medical treatments found in the United States. She told me of her brothers, and their struggles with drugs and alcohol. “Conventional medicine”, Victoria argues, did nothing to help her brothers overcome their hardships. She stated:

It’s not about someone being bad, or even genetics. I really think it has to do with their pain, and there’s nothing out there [to help them]. And they’ve tried anti-depressants, they’ve been to therapists, and it doesn’t work. It doesn’t work. My parents have done everything. And meditation has helped my brothers. I pushed my one brother to do it, and I’m gonna try to get my other brother to do it, too.

For Victoria, “Mindfulness” was seen as a way to help her family when other methods of healing seemed to have failed. She continued to say that this was an important reason why she continued to practice “Mindfulness.”

Tristan also was concerned about maintaining “mental fitness.” During our interview, he spoke of a terrible motorcycle accident that he was involved in when he was younger. Because of that accident, Tristan received severe injuries both to his body and to his mind. For Tristan, “Mindfulness” provided a structured outlet to release the pain and frustration he feels as a result of that accident. He told me during our interview that “Mindfulness” helped to calm his brain, and helped him to not “run away with his thoughts.” Since practicing “Mindfulness”, Tristan told me he has made amends with his family, is able to sleep peacefully at night, and is able to relax his mind. It is not only the “Western Lay-Friends” who are concerned with “mental fitness.”

Some of my Vietnamese-American informants also saw “Mindfulness” as a tool to address the stresses of everyday life. Marian, like Jane, uses the practices she learned from the Thích Nhất Hạnh approach to help cope with her life as a college student. When asked about this, Marian iterated, “school is very hard, and it's stressful”, and so the practice of Mindfulness allows her to “come back to [her] breath, and remain positive” in life.

Even Br. Bảo found “Mindfulness” appealing for similar reasons. Through the encouragement of his mother, the young Br. Bảo registered for a “Mindfulness” retreat which he said, lasted four to five days. It was interesting to me that Br. Bảo mentioned that he did not like the “Mindfulness Practices” at all at first. He commented:

I did not like the Practice at all because as a teenager, you know, [I was] very energetic. [I couldn't] breathe for instance when you hear the bell you have to stop... [stop] and breathe, and walk slowly. Because as a teenager, [I was very] enthusiastic [with a lot of] physical movement. But, after a while, y'know when you get used to the Practice after...a couple of days of getting used to the bell, stop[ping] and breath[ing], I fe[lt] very, very peaceful.

For Br. Bảo, “Mindful Living” was something that he had to work at from the very beginning because it was something different than “just chanting” as he had told me earlier. Although he does practice “Mindfulness” in a more traditional way as a spiritual specialist in the religion,

the fact that he initially sought out the practice to find and maintain inner peace rather than seeking it out for salvation purposes proves that “Mindfulness” satisfied something non-spiritual for him.

JUST ANOTHER 'PARALLEL CONGREGATION'? : THE PRODUCTION OF DIVERSITY

These different sets of concerns produce a diversity of interpretations of “Mindfulness” at Magnolia Grove. When various groups at other Buddhist institutions share a common physical space, scholars use the term “parallel congregations” or the “two Buddisms thesis” to analyze the varieties of interpretations found at a site (Numrich 1996:63;Loss 2010:85). Numrich contends that “parallelism” occurs on the local level when “ethnic-Asians and non-Asian converts follow separate forms of [Buddhism] under a single temple roof and at the direction of a shared monastic leadership.” It is this “parallelism thesis” that has shaped how other scholarships have approached the question of diversity within American Buddhism.

Within the author's (Numrich 1996:65) “parallel congregations”, the ethnic-Asian “congregation” and the non-ethnic convert “congregation” may come together at the same physical location for a time, but “will merely perform their respective religious acts...without reference to or sometimes even awareness of the presence of each other.” While there are some similarities between Numrich's “parallel congregations” and Magnolia Grove, there are also some differences. These differences produce internal diversity at Magnolia Grove in terms of how “Mindfulness” is practiced, utilized, and interpreted at the site.

One major similarity is the percentage of ethnic-Asian members compared to the non-ethnic practitioners at the site (Numrich 1996:66). Like the author's research sites in Los Angeles and Chicago, Magnolia Grove experiences the greatest number of non-ethnic practitioners to the site during formal retreats. While the Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American practitioners greatly outnumber the non-Vietnamese members, the latter are still an

important presence at the site and at other Thích Nhất Hạnh centers across the United States.

But, the main difference between the author's sites and Magnolia Grove Monastery is that Magnolia Grove practitioners, whether ethnic-Asian Buddhist or otherwise, practice “Mindfulness” at the same time, using the same rooms, and participating in the exact same rituals and activities. At Magnolia Grove, practitioners use the same space to practice together as one group or *sangha*. This is dissimilar to the “two Buddhisms thesis” that I have mentioned as the “Ethnic and Convert Buddhism” distinction which contends that it, “differentiates on several levels Asian Buddhist immigrants from Western Buddhists, who might use the same center or temple at different times for different purposes” (Loss 2010:85). The author continues to say that this “thesis” is able to distinguish these “two Buddhisms” on the pretense that because different sets of practitioners use the space at different times, this “forms parallel communities that hardly cross each other's paths.”

Now that the concerns of the practitioners have been discussed, I will now detail how these concerns are approached at the site. Each individual at the site constructs a “localization process” which is how they position themselves within their social environment. This “process”, and the elements that go into constructing this process, will now be examined in greater detail.

IV. LOCALIZATION PROCESSES: MAKING “MINDFULNESS” MEANINGFUL

In this case-study, the social environment involved is religiously oriented in nature since Magnolia Grove's visitors and members participate in chants, rituals, and activities based on Thích Nhất Hạnh's "Mindfulness" approach. People position themselves at the site by the use of boundaries. This includes worldviews, ethnic and familial backgrounds, language, and the use of physical space. These various boundaries are tools people use to situate themselves to produce meaning for their "Mindfulness" practice as well as to produce a sense of identity and belonging at Magnolia Grove.

Localization processes in this project refer to how individuals approach and relate to the practices and philosophies of "Mindfulness." Also, localization processes refer to the actions and interactions of individuals as they position themselves in relation to other people within the same social environment. Thus, when differences arise due to boundaries such as language, ethnicity, or worldviews, people must accept, reject, or adapt to these differences if they wish to participate at the site.

Localization processes are analytical tools to understand the shifting boundaries and perceptions of how people "do religion." This opening statement requires unpacking, and I will start with what is meant by religion. In a sociocultural sense, religion is, "expressed by means of human ideas, symbols, feelings, practices, and organizations" that help to shape, construct, redefine, or reject "social interactions, structures, and processes and in turn, influence social life and cultural meanings" (Beckford 2003:2). The word "religion" carries with it weighty connotations and possible negative associations which make labeling an individual, group, or institution as "religious" difficult or unproductive. Thus, people may "do" religion, while rejecting to call themselves "religious" or even spiritual for a variety of

reasons.

For example, in a case-study involving Israeli practitioners (Loss 2010:92), the author is careful not to label them as “Buddhists” as the people associated “religion” with a “ritualized, institutionalized, traditional...oppressive blind faith, which divides people, incites communities against one another, and justifies arrogance.” The author (Loss 2010:90-92) gives several reasons for informants rejecting the label of “Buddhist” including, but not limited to, the fact that not adhering to a label, “reduce[d] the threat to their communal and familial sense of belonging”, is in accordance with the teachings of the historical Buddha to shed all “restricting labels”, and the notion that they had a negative image of what “religion” was. This sentiment was most strongly shared by Victoria who also refused to label herself as a “Buddhist” for similar reasons. This is why I must be cautious and careful when using “religion” when speaking of the activities, rituals, and events that happened at Magnolia Grove. This uncertainty of how to talk about religion and religious practices is an issue when describing the people who visit the site, and how they relate to one another.

That being said, however, religion is “not just another example of a contested concept”, but is also a “‘site’ where boundary disputes are endemic and where...groups are prepared to defend their definition of religion against opponents” (Beckford 2003:13). Boundaries, therefore, play a vital role in how people situate themselves in relation to others in their social environment. It is through boundary construction, rejection, and adaptation that groups can be formed at Magnolia Grove and other similar institutions. Some view “Mindfulness” as a way to gain spiritual benefits such as reaching a higher state of being, while others view the practice as being stripped from any or all of religious connotations and dogma, seeking instead a way to gain peace and solace as was discussed in the previous chapter.

Boundaries can be either tangible such as geographic location or intangible such as those that group people together based upon things such as age, gender, ethnicity, class, or education.

These borders are not static, unmoving entities, but are fluid and prone to changes and shifts as people renegotiate themselves and the social environment around them. These boundary contestations, rejections, and adaptations are key concepts to the localization processes that I contend, occur at Magnolia Grove monastery and elsewhere where different people from different life-paths gather and interact with one another. In other words, people shift and change boundaries to make sense of their environment and adapt new meanings that fit accordingly to their lives.

Boundaries are constructed, shifted, and questioned continuously as people interact to give them a position in relationship to others around them. Boundaries construct a sense of a person's identity by means of various “struggles” (Joseph 2004:13). The author uses the term “struggles” as I use the word “boundaries” in the sense that these struggles over “classifications” and “power” that decide the “legitimate definition of the divisions of the social world” ultimately “make and unmake groups”. It is the “making and unmaking” of groups within a shared place that localization processes occur, and actors construct, maintain, and question their role in the space.

By discussing various practices and views shared by my informants through interviews and conversations, a picture will be shaped in regards to how Magnolia Grove functions as an institution, and how the site and its members fit within the realm of Buddhism in the United States. It will also show how the aforementioned concerns are dealt with at the site. As stated in the introduction, Thích Nhất Hạnh’s interpretation of Buddhism is called various things such as “Mindfulness Practice”, “Living Mindfully”, following the “Order of Interbeing”, and, more popularly known in scholarly literature as, “Engaged Buddhism”. While the terms may vary according to the source, the emphasis of the approach advocated by Thích Nhất Hạnh emphasizes being constantly aware of one's surroundings, paying particular attention to one's “in-breath and out-breath”. The emphasis on breathing and

“returning to one's breath” was a concept my informants often spoke of when describing the fundamental practices of “Mindfulness”

It is by implementing the practice of “Mindful Living”, one is able to maintain peace, serenity and calmness of mind with the intent of sharing such positive products with those around you. All one has to “do” in this tradition, as B.C. told me one evening, is “just breathe...it's as simple as that.” It is this emphasis on “Mindfulness” and “Mindful Practices” that social activism is cultivated, according to Thích Nhất Hạnh, due to the fact that individuals must learn to love, accept, and appreciate themselves before they can spread such positivity with the world.

In Thích Nhất Hạnh’s approach, “Mindful Living” equates to a peaceful living, free from violence, killing, and war. It is this applicability and inclusiveness of the Thích Nhất Hạnh approach in everyday life that makes it appealing for a variety of people spanning different ages, backgrounds, and education. By having a multitude of different people congregating in the same space, a flow of information, ideas, and worldviews are, therefore, felt by all parties involved in participating at the monastery and at other practice centers. But, while there is a flow of ideas and interpretations present at the individual level, these flows are still regulated by Magnolia Grove as it acts as a religious institution. Therefore, while there is diversity present, this diversity acts within boundaries put into place by the site.

The physical site of Magnolia Grove is also important in that people transverse and cross each other when coming into contact with other individuals and other ideas. Analyzing how people position themselves within their social environment depends upon who they are with and what roles the person fills or is expected to fill at the site.

In addition, localization processes refers to the construction of meaning attributed to the interactions between individuals and social environments that shapes and maintains boundaries on many levels; it also gives people a sense of who they are in their social world.

I believe this process is internally constructed by the individual through socialization, upbringing, personal experiences, and their outlook on life. In addition, the site of Magnolia Grove itself is also a boundary that reinforces and reflects these layers as well. All of these layers, once put together within an individual's mind, form the foundation that the person uses to interact with the world around them.

Space, therefore, is important to all actors at Magnolia Grove because the physical site provides a place where practitioners define what things are accepted, rejected, or reconsidered by the individual or group. This constant interaction with others and their personal worldviews, experiences, and interpretations of “Mindfulness” is how localization processes are formed. It is a process in that, not only are the individuals influencing each other and the space around them, but also the social space provides influence as well. This can be seen at Magnolia Grove in the rituals, cultural events, and retreats that are held there.

Organized events or activities, retreats, and religious practices provide the site for localization to occur and to be witnessed. In this case study, monastics, lay participants, and retreatants all use the space at the Magnolia Grove Monastery for a range of reasons, and by doing so, bring in an influx of information across symbolic boundaries such as language, gender, or ethnicity. These different elements come together at the same place for different actors who then take the information and interpret it in accordance to their own worldviews.

The types of information being spread depend upon the individuals or the groups of individuals involved, but the information could be in reference to how one participates in the monastery's activities, what “practicing Mindfulness” means (or “should mean”, as Victoria told me during an interview), or the importance of the historical and cultural background of Thích Nhất Hạnh and his teachings. Information such as teaching new retreatants how to breathe slowly, eat silently, or walk by coinciding their steps with their breath are all instances that show how particular values, worldviews, and ideals are put forth by actors who

seek to make sense of their own world by voicing their position of authority on these matters. When ideas, worldviews, and traditions are pushed up against competing ones within the same space, I contend that localization occurs.

The processes of localization take place anywhere where there are people sharing a common social space, but have different experiences, backgrounds, or worldviews. Just as people do not define themselves by a singular overarching factor such as gender or race, it is important to recognize how different aspects of informant's daily lives are constantly being negotiated, changed, or rejected depending on the circumstances at hand. By broadening the scope in this way, the way people navigate their own sense of self and their identity will also be broadened to include what is considered non-religious elements.

Localization processes are evident in several areas: 1) rituals and worldviews, 2) language use, 3) psychosocial elements, and 4) the symbolic changing of the physical space of Magnolia Grove. These four categories show how localization practices and processes play out in the lives of the informants of Magnolia Grove. Localization is an important aspect of the field site as these lived practices and views influence how participants deal with one another, how they interpret their environment at the monastery, as well as their feelings on religion, Buddhism, and spirituality.

The monastics, lay practitioners, and retreat members at Magnolia Grove construct their individual localization process in various ways as new people are constantly present at the site. This illustrates the growing relatedness of different people across time and physical location. This is important to the larger concept of culture and cultural forms, which includes religion and spirituality that is studied by anthropologists and other social scientists. Ulf Hannerz (1992:8) reflects upon the usefulness of such concepts when referring to the similar notion of syncretism. He states that:

...[cultures]...as packages of meaning and meaningful forms, distinctive to

collectivities and territories, is the one most obviously affected by increasing interconnectedness in space. As people move with their meanings, and as meanings find ways of traveling even when people stay put, territories cannot really contain cultures. Localization in its various forms are tools utilized by people in their daily lives to navigate their space in a world filled with increasing interrelatedness, and to make sense of different cultures or life paths that they may come across in their surroundings both near and far.

In response to this statement and others of a similar nature by Hannerz, this project is another piece to add to the growing literature on how the interconnectedness of the present-day coexists with, brushes up against, and comes into contention with people who are constantly seeking meaning within their lives and their surroundings. There is a continuous stream of people coming in and out of the monastery, and like Hannerz asserts, it is this interconnectedness that makes culture dynamic and meaningful for actors within a space. It is the moving of people and ideas across physical and symbol space that internal variation occurs.

Thus, it is an addition to illustrate what Clifford Geertz (1973:93) refers to as “cultural patterns” as an assortment of various “models” implemented and used by individuals and groups of people to “give meaning...objective and conceptual form, to social and psychological reality by both shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves.” I used these “cultural patterns” as a base to understand my time in the field, constantly dealing with differences in opinions and views from those around me. It is through similar means that differences of interpretation arise when dealing with “Mindfulness” at Magnolia Grove. It is by means of cultural patterns that Bethany may see herself as person practicing Buddhism as a religion, while Victoria would not agree to that sentiment, even though they perform the same rituals and share similar worldviews. Because of the many different interpretations and views held by the practitioners, monastics, and visitors to Magnolia Grove, it can be said that the site is, in a way, a kind of culture unto itself. I will now discuss the elements that practitioners use to construct their “localization process” which, in turn, provides a way to

address their concerns at the site.

RITUALS AND WORLDVIEWS: LOCALIZATION BY INTERPRETATION

Two private and public spaces where localization occurs are in the areas of worldviews and rituals. Worldviews are schemas that shape and mold how people relate to social interactions, life events, communications, and other experiences. People constantly shift, alter, transform, or reject aspects of their personal experiences, interactions, or identity in order to make sense of the world around them. This is why an individual or community's worldview is an arena where localization is constantly taking place. When someone or a group of people change their worldview, they ultimately change how they view the world and how they interact with their environment, so localization is used as a tool to catalyst such change.

Rituals play an important role in the activities practiced at Magnolia Grove, and are performed daily and during special events. is defined as a, “formal, significant, symbolically intended, and complex action” (Gellner 2001:61). Rituals also have been considered separate or distinct from everyday activities of daily life for one reason or another, and it is this discernment that has characterized what marks a ritual as such rather than just an activity of habit (Gellner 2001:81).

Rituals and worldviews overlap at times with one feeding into the other and vice-versa. Rituals are important in people's lives because a ritual, “simultaneously imposes an order, accounts for the origin and nature of that order, and shapes the people's dispositions to experience that order” (Bell 1997:21-22). The author also notes that, while finding similar rituals across religions play a part in understanding and “proving the unity within human diversity”, rituals also “delineate the broad outlines of what is meaningful human experience in general.” Rituals are especially meaningful in religious institutions, spiritual practice

centers, and cultural community centers where rituals act as a way to show an individual's or group's priorities within a given site.

Similarly, rituals form an important part of the structured activities found at Magnolia Grove. Rituals are woven into the daily lives of the practitioners, and subsequently influence worldviews as they are lived expressions of a particular lifestyle, opinion, or view. It is important to first detail specific examples of rituals in order to tie in with the larger picture of “localization processes.” I will first go over why rituals are incorporated into the Thích Nhất Hạnh approach, and the root of “Mindfulness” practice. Then I will go over some of the views expressed to me by my informants about why “Mindful Living” is an attractive tradition for them. Documenting rituals and worldviews are two of the ways in which practitioners construct, reinstate, and contest individual and group boundaries at the site.

There are several types of rituals implemented at the Magnolia Grove Monastery involving groups of activities concerning meditation, chanting and religious services, eating, and walking. These structured activities and practices are not necessarily distinct from the everyday activities at the monastery. A central tenet of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s approach to Buddhism is that it is structured in such a way to make it easier to incorporate the practices into one’s daily life and routine without having to specifically segregate oneself from the rest of society. Activities such as ritualized breathing, eating, and walking are not unique to Thích Nhất Hạnh’s version of Buddhism for these “mindful practices” are part of the aforementioned classical concept of “The Noble Eightfold Path” that emphasizes cultivating “Right Mindfulness” or an awareness in terms of every breath and every action of the practitioner as vital to achieving the right mindset to achieve *nirvana* or enlightenment.

RIGHT MINDFULNESS IN “MINDFUL LIVING”

“Right Mindfulness” is one of the elements mentioned in “The Noble Eightfold Path”

of classical Buddhism, and it is this “Right Mindfulness” that underlines and structures Thích Nhất Hạnh’s approach. “Right Mindfulness”, as a “mental faculty” in classical Buddhist teachings is described as a:

presence of mind, attentiveness, or awareness...[With mindfulness,] the mind is deliberately kept at the level of *bare attention*, a detached observation of what is happening within us and around us in the present moment. In the practice of right mindfulness the mind is trained to remain in the present, open, quiet, and alert...All judgements and interpretations have to be suspended, or if they occur, just registered and dropped (Bodhi 1994:79-80).

Thus, “Right Mindfulness” is implemented in every ritual done at the monastery, and during every activity done during the course of the day. The ability to weave rituals, worldviews, and practices into one's everyday life is something that was mentioned several times by my lay practitioner informants, Bill and Jane, in particular.

When I asked Bill about what drew him to this style of practice, he also explained how “Mindful Living” had helped him to become generally a better person. He had told me that he was born and raised in the Catholic faith, went to a Catholic school, and attended a Catholic university. When I inquired about what was so appealing to him about Thích Nhất Hạnh’s approach, he commented about the main Plum Village monastery he stayed at for a few months:

I guess when I went to France I found people that really...I mean, weren’t... *perfectly* happy, but were much happier than anyone, any people I had ever met before, and were...not *perfectly* kind, but were *kinder* than any people I’ve ever met before...It wasn’t a *theory*, it was *real* people *living* lives y’know...in a way that I hadn’t...I didn’t think people could live to be *that*... honest and kind...⁴

Growing up in a traditional Catholic family and attending Catholic school myself, I related to his sentiment searching for something with structure that also is grounded in everyday life rather than in dogmas or theories written in books. Whenever I asked Bill about his practice or the Thích Nhất Hạnh approach, rather than telling me about the different chants or

4 The use of italics indicates emphasis either in tone or volume by the person speaking based off of audio recorded interviews.

religious aspects of the tradition, he focused on how beneficial it was to him as a person in his daily life.

Jane as well emphasized why she liked “Mindfulness” practice, and how her practice has influenced her, specifically in terms of her school life. Being a young university student, Jane faces issues arising from having to balance a family life, an academic life, a work life, and a social life with her friends. Part of our interview went as follows:

Jane: I’d say that...this is, this tradition I’m in now, it’s more of a way...of *life*, like a practice you could put in daily [life]...when Thích Nhất Hạnh breaks it down, he breaks it down in everyday language, that...everybody can understand...even *kids*...which I like...

Interviewer: So...how have you incorporated Mindfulness Practice in your daily life, if at all?

Jane: I study *a lot*, and I *stress out* a lot and have really bad test anxiety. And so, I use the meditation and breathing methods to help calm me down so I can focus...sometimes if I need to, I’ll have a five or ten minute meditation session like, at home in my bed before I go to sleep or whenever I wake up.

For Jane, “Mindfulness” was something that helped her cope with the demands and stresses of university life. But, help with Jane's college life was not the only reason she was drawn to “Mindfulness” practice. Jane also told me that the Thích Nhất Hạnh approach has also helped her to be closer to her family as they all practice the same approach. Regardless of the motivation, visitors and practitioners alike acknowledged the simplicity and practical benefits of the Thích Nhất Hạnh approach in their day to day lives.

The usefulness of the “Mindfulness” practices in daily life was a topic several of my informants spoke of when I asked them what was appealing about this approach, but this sentiment was not limited to lay practitioners at the site. Bảo, the elder brother I had the opportunity to interview, commented in a similar fashion:

It’s very, ya’ know, engaged... [This approach is] not like a theory, you can apply them [‘them’ being a reference to the rituals associated with Thích Nhất Hạnh’s “Mindfulness Practice”], and it was very engaging [in] my life as a teenager, and also as a college student. I felt very happy to practice with this kind of teaching...’Mindful

Living.' I felt that, even though at a young age...even though my practice is not 100%...I try, ya' know, a little bit and a little bit [every day].

Rituals, therefore, make up a large portion of the daily activities for those practicing and visiting the monastery.

These examples of the importance of “Mindful Living” in my informants' lives answers the concerns mentioned in the previous chapter. From my interviews and observations, the practitioners, members, and visitors I spoke with appreciated the ease and applicability of the Thích Nhất Hạnh approach in their daily lives. Also, various members interpret the practices differently according to the needs and backgrounds of the individuals such as Jane, who uses the practice to help her deal with university life, and Bill, who was drawn to the practice due to the potential benefits he saw of becoming a kinder, happier person. These outcomes of “Mindful Living” are how practitioners approach the concern for “mental fitness” within their lives.

Thus, there are a variety of activities at Magnolia Grove that are ritualistic in nature, and many of these things are events that happen throughout the course of the day. Therefore, I will now detail what rituals or “Mindfulness Practices” as my informants called them, are carried out in a general fashion within Magnolia Grove. Second, I will detail specific examples from my own experiences, observations, and informant interviews which shows the boundaries or elements that make up an individual's “localization process.” There are many rituals I could potentially draw upon, but I will first comment on bowing since it was one of the more visible rituals I could observe during my fieldwork.

THE MEANINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS OF BOWING

There are several set instances where one is expected to bow, and sometimes, the participant is expected to know when to bow and in what direction. In other times, a ritual of

bowing in repetition will be led by a monastic who guides the activity. Bowing is an activity to show respect to other participants, to indicate the start or finish of an activity, or, done in a particular fashion for a specific purpose. What was most interesting to me as a researcher and as someone trying to understand “Mindfulness” was the fact that there were multiple reasons given for bowing. From my own field notes, I wrote several reasons for bowing:

- 1) “Show respect for, and kiss Mother Earth” symbolically through bowing (documented after a specific “Kissing the Earth” bowing ritual where the phrase was invoked).
- 2) Pay homage to the historical Buddha and all bodhisattvas (this was done in a specific ritual performed to give thanks to various celestial beings).
- 3) Acknowledge and give thanks spiritual and physical ancestors, and the universe (done during the Holiday Retreat).
- 4) Pay respect to oneself (by bowing to the Buddha statue, I was told on several occasions, one is inherently “bowing to the Buddha inside oneself”).

While there are undoubtedly more interpretations for bowing than these four listed above, these were the ones that I had observed, and asked others for their opinions while in the field. Bowing is a visual and public display of ritual that, although is performed for various reasons, follows a fairly predictable series of actions. Once the general actions of how one bows is covered, I will move on to the differences and shifts in meaning that I saw as evidence of multiple interpretations of how informants viewed the action.

During the daily rituals performed at the monastery such as meditation, for example, participants are expected to enter into the meditation hall with their shoes removed, the women entering in from the entrance to the left of the main Buddha statue, and men entering from the right side of the building. Once you enter, participants are expected to turn towards the large Buddha statue seated in the front of the hall, and bow with their hands clasped together. In my own observation, if a retreatant did not bow upon entering the meditation hall, it was not openly corrected by a monastic, but was often corrected by the retreatant themselves if they saw others performing the action upon entering and exiting the building. All of the monastics I observed, however, made sure to bow slowly and deliberately to the

large Buddha statue situated at the front of the room.

After the meditation session is over, a small bell sounds, and participants stand in unison and bow to one another. Then a second bell sounds, and the community turns once again to the Buddha statue, and bows to it. The community then disperses toward the exits, and before stepping outside, it is customary to bow to the Buddha one last time. This ritual happens for every meditation service at the site, or for an activity such as “Dharma Talks” (speeches or dialogues given by resident monastics or on tape or on video by Thích Nhất Hạnh about Buddhist practices or living mindfully in daily life.)

Another meaningful ritual where bowing is the main activity is something referred to as the practice of “Touching the Earth.” During this ritual, participants are guided through a dialogue consisting of things in which to be thankful such as one’s friends, family, or spiritual practice. After something has been listed and a bell sounds, participants, who have been standing with palms placed together while facing the Buddha statue, touch their clasped hands to their heads, and kneel on the ground with their palms facing upwards. After a few moments in this position, a bell is sounded again, and participants stand up in unison, bow again, and the next line of dialogue is read. While this is called “Touching the Earth” in the Thích Nhất Hạnh approach as a way to show respect to the “Mother Earth”, other Buddhist traditions also practice such bowing rituals as a way to show respect or reverence to the Buddha, or to one’s ancestors. While all of these justifications have been invoked either implicitly or explicitly, it is how actors interpret the ritual for themselves, and what meaning they ascribe to them that ultimately shapes an individual's view on the practice of “Mindfulness” itself.

An example of how a ritual's meaning can shift in other circumstances is when I participated in a “Touching the Earth” event during the New Year’s Eve event at the “Holiday Retreat” at the end of the year. As previously described, “Touching the Earth” was

originally defined as an event to show one's appreciation for the Earth and its environment, but during the New Year's Eve event, the reason that was given for "Touching the Earth" was so that participants could "give thanks and homage to our physical and spiritual ancestors." Some of the things specifically listed during this time were various Buddhist entities and celestial beings, prominent Buddhist teachers of the past, one's relatives who have passed away as well as to the "ancestors of North America", the Native Americans.

I found it interesting that they specifically used the reference of the Native Americans to conjure up an image of the the physical ancestors of the United States, but I was not able to get a firm answer from my informants about why the Native Americans were used in the ceremony. It could be that, since the ceremony was geared towards giving thanks to many different kinds of ancestors, the monastics included the Native Americans as one of the ancestors of the country they now live in. It could also have been that the chant could have been written as one uniform speech for all of the practice centers to recite for that time. What is important about this is the fact that they called upon their physical and spiritual beings in a practice that is meaningful to both the ethnic-Asian members of the site as well as the retreatants.

Not only was the "Touching of the Earth" ritual slightly altered for this particular occasion, but the types of bows we did also incorporated outside religious elements. The "normal" style of bowing that is usually done at the monastery is the type of bowing previously described, and which one sister told me was like, "offering yourself, your strengths, or your weaknesses to your spiritual ancestors" which was why the palms are always pointed up towards the sky in this bow. This style of bowing was done during the New Year's Eve event, but was used alongside what was called "Tibetan-style" bowing. "Tibetan-style" bowing, the same sister told the community that evening, was like, "asking for an embrace from Mother Earth." Instead of kneeling on the ground with the legs tucked

underneath the body, this style of bowing required the participant to stretch out fully on the ground on one's stomach, arms out in front of the body, and the face touching the floor. During the New Year's Eve event, the community practiced both styles of bowing at various periods throughout the rituals practiced over the course of the night.

This ritual event of bowing, chanting, and other activities was performed at the monastery during the Holiday Retreat to celebrate the coming of the new year. We said special chants in thanks to our ancestors, ate as a community, and wrote our resolutions on paper to burn as a sign of "offering the resolutions up to the universe." The differences in the type of chants and bowing performed during that time is important because it shows what Ebaugh and Chafetz (2000:388) term "Formal Ceremonial Reproduction of Ethnicity."

According to the authors (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000:388-389), "rituals conducted at religious sites contribute to the reproduction of ethnicity by reenacting ceremonies" that are meaningful to the group performing them. They give several examples from different religious institutions such as Greek Orthodox, Korean Protestant, and Chinese Buddhist institutions where such things as reenacting the "Chinese New Year" or the "Lantern Festival" within a religious setting helped to reaffirm the site and the members as part of a Chinese or Korean ethnic community. This, I contend, is also happening at Magnolia Grove through events such as celebrating culturally important holidays such as the Lunar New Year, eating Vietnamese cuisine, and performing "Mindfulness" chants and rituals in Vietnamese. There are other events such as meditation practices that also bring about processes of localization.

"A WAY OF LIFE": MEDITATIVE ACTIVITIES AT MAGNOLIA GROVE

One of the daily activities performed in a ritualized fashion at Magnolia Grove is what is called "Mindful Walking" or "Walking Meditation." "Walking Meditation" requires

participants to “bring their mind to their feet”, as Thích Nhất Hạnh described in an audio speech. One walks slowly, taking a single breath for every 4-5 steps taken while at the same time, living in the present moment by walking “just to walk”, and not in order to reach a specific destination. When doing “Walking Meditation” with a *sangha*⁵, it is usually done in complete silence, and everyone tries to keep a steady pace so as not to get too far ahead or too far behind the group. Again, it should be noted that “Walking Meditation” is not specifically unique to the Thích Nhất Hạnh approach, but is a practice utilized by other religious traditions as well. What is important for this project is how the meditation is used by practitioners, and how they utilize it and interpret its significance in their lives.

As stated earlier, Frank felt no disconnect between who he was as a Christian practitioner, and who he was as someone who practiced “Mindfulness.” One prominent example of this, as he told me during a conversation while standing on a bridge overlooking the Buddhist figure of Great Compassion, Avalokiteśvara, is that during “Walking Meditation”, he recites one syllable of the Christian phrase “Hallelujah” for every step he takes. I inquired about how such shifts in meaning are viewed by the monastics at Magnolia Grove, and I had originally expected them to issue a formal statement in regards to how participants are supposed to “do” the Walking Meditation. Interestingly, all of the monastics I talked to about this spoke of their happiness that anyone, “Buddhist, Non-Buddhist, or ‘Western Lay-Friend’”, practiced alongside the monks and nuns of the community. In the end, several of them informed me, it is not about worrying about “how one walks”, but the important thing is to be “present in the moment with your breath and your steps.” Whatever a participant does to achieve this awareness in the present moment is not as important as one returning to the present itself.

5 To reiterate, *sangha* is synonymous with “group”, “association”, or “community” similar to the religious concept of a “congregation.”

Meditation is considered a central practice within Buddhism, and in the Zen tradition, in particular. Although some particulars of meditation vary from tradition to tradition, the purpose of meditation is to bring a sense of peace, calmness, and stillness to one's body and by extension, to one's mind. Several schools of Buddhism such as Zen Buddhism practice meditation, as it is believed to be a way to gain enlightenment or achieve *nirvana*.

To meditate in Thích Nhất Hạnh's tradition is to meditate mindfully as well, with a deep emphasis on recognizing one's breath as part of feeling alive and "in the present moment of the here and the now" as its members refer to it. The notion of meditation for the sake of achieving enlightenment is not the point because, as Thích Nhất Hạnh frequently mentions in his talks, *nirvana*, the Pure Land, (a celestial place similar to heaven in certain Zen traditions), and the kingdom of God can all be experienced in the present moment rather than having to wait for some time in the future.

This can be considered a deviation from other forms of Buddhism such as the practices found in the older forms of the Theravada and some Mahayana traditions in that these practices tend to place an emphasis on the escape from "birth, death, and rebirth" as is mentioned in the historical collection of texts called the Buddhist Pāli Canon. Therefore, rather than attempting to achieve the goal of *nirvana* by means of "extinguishing one's desires", Thích Nhất Hạnh advocates using meditation to realize *nirvana* within the present moment.

The monastics at Magnolia Grove instructed me to meditate in this fashion by first sitting on one of the brown meditation cushions placed on top of a matching square mat. Sitting in what is known as the "Half-Lotus" position (sitting cross-legged with the heel of one foot pointing upwards and placed on the thigh while the other leg rests on the floor, relaxed), I was prompted to focus on my breathing by saying to myself, "Breathing in, I know that I'm breathing in. Breathing out, I know I am breathing out." I was also advised to count

my breaths if I felt random thoughts arise during the meditation as well as to physically notice the rising and falling of my abdomen. Never once in this teaching was there any mention to sitting in a certain way because, “that’s how the Buddha sat when he gained enlightenment” or any other reference to religious aspects of Buddhism.

Localization occurs in this instance in that, although the practice teaches focusing on one’s breath, several people I spoke with had different opinions about what that meant. Frank mentioned that his way of meditating mindfully meant to focus his energy on “The Trinity” (what is known as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit in certain Christian traditions), while another, Victoria, mentioned to me that she “sorts out her feelings” during meditation. Therefore, people use the practice in various ways to achieve various outcomes, whether it be of a religious nature or otherwise. But it is this collection of competing voices that produces the internal variation at Magnolia Grove that was discussed in the previous chapter. Thus, it is through these different interpretations that shape and influence the role and perception of the monastery in the region and in the United States. While rituals, walking, and meditative practices are important in understanding how members “do Mindfulness”, eating and food also play a large role in localization processes.

“MY FAVORITE PRACTICE? MINDFUL EATING, OF COURSE!”

Meals at Magnolia Grove are also a ritualized activity used to address the concerns of the practitioners at the site. When asked about his favorite “Mindfulness” practice, Tristan did not hesitate before answering that “Mindful Eating” was the practice he liked best. For Tristan, having the chance to sit down quietly for a meal without hurrying to finish was something that was difficult for him, at first. But he told me, the more he practiced this activity during mealtimes, the more relaxed he felt while eating. For Tristan, “Mindful Eating” was an opportunity to maintain “mental fitness” at the site.

One “eats mindfully”, as I was told, by chewing one’s food at least 30 times, taking the time to notice the texture, smell, and look of the food in front of them. One eats slowly and contemplatively, reflecting on all of the elements and activities that had to come together in such a way as to make the meal possible to be consumed. Another aspect of Mindful Eating is eating in what the monastics call a “Noble Silence” which is to get one’s food and begin the first half of the meal without talking unless absolutely necessary as well as to minimize noises such as the scraping of a chair as one sits down to eat, for example. All of these elements, when taken together, give a sort of serene elegance and gracefulness to the usual mundane activity of eating.

Since there were more people in attendance at formal retreats, meals taken during these times were done a little differently. Rather than the food being placed buffet style in the large kitchen adjacent to the dining hall area as was the case during my two week general stay, the buffet tables were put outside underneath the main veranda area just outside of the kitchen for easier access. As I will now explain, getting a meal, sitting down, and eating can all be ritualized to provide practitioners with another activity to enhance mindfulness in their daily lives.

To begin, once everyone lined up at either of the two tables situated parallel to one another, members could begin going through the various stations lined with dishes, utensils, and condiments. But, once someone reached the first station which had a variety of deep dish bowls, plates, chopsticks, and other utensils, it was customary that members first bow with their hands clasped in a prayer-like manner, offering thanks for the meal about to be received. As people made their way down the line, it is also important to note that this “Eating Meditation” ritual begins in silence.

The food during my first weekend retreat, as well as the food I’ve eaten during my other stays as well, is vegan and, often, Vietnamese-inspired cuisine. In other words, many of

the meals cooked by the monastics included large portions of various kinds of rice or noodles (usually rice noodles rather than egg-based, as these noodles are also vegan), soy-based dishes cooked various ways to imitate things such as stir-fried beef, chicken salad, or seafood used in Vietnamese-style food, and an array of fresh fruits and vegetables. Breakfast usually involved a selection of foods as well including oatmeal, freshly baked vegan breads, fruits, an assortment of spreads and jams, and the choices of soy-milk, rice-milk, or almond-milk to drink.

After everyone has gotten their share of food, we were directed to sit quietly in the dining area next door. A nun sitting next to a meditation bell held the instrument used to sound the bell, and had her hands folded in front of her. She proceeded to then sound the bell three times before setting her instrument back on the table. Picking up a sheet of paper, she read from a prayer sheet in English that referenced eating mindfully by practicing “The 5 Contemplations.” Taken from the official Plum Village website, the Five Contemplations read:

- 1) This food is a gift of the whole universe, the earth, the sky and much mindful work.
- 2) May we eat in mindfulness so as to be worthy of it.
- 3) May we transform our unskillful states of mind and learn to eat in moderation.
- 4) May we take only foods that nourish us and prevent illness.
- 5) May we accept this food to realize the path of understanding and love.

After the prayer and the reading of the contemplations, members use the first twenty minutes to eat in silence, chewing each bite of food slowly and thoroughly. Once that time has passed, however, members are free to engage in soft conversation with their peers. This is how many of the meals were passed at the monastery during my extended stay as well.

One particularly embarrassing moment occurred for me as an ethnographer while trying to “fit in” during my first visit at the monastery that I recall vividly in my mind. Sundays at the monastery are called “Days of Mindfulness” which are open to the public and consists of spending the majority of the day with the monastics and other participants while

engaging in activities with the community or *sangha* such as “Dharma Talks.” The first time I visited the monastery was on one such Sunday, and the last activity of the day was a “Formal Lunch” which meant that participants sat on mats in the main meditation hall rather than using the dining area with tables and chairs.

While I was informed at the time that it was a “Formal Lunch”, and given a description of what it meant to “eat mindfully”, I did not realize we would not be eating while sitting in chairs with the plates of food on tables. I tried my best to remain as quiet as possible, paying close attention to minimize the noise of clanging utensils, plates or bowls while I got my meal. Having gotten a soup bowl, a rice bowl, a plate, utensils, and a cup of water, I was trying my hardest to balance everything quietly. The “Noble Silence” was broken, however, when I entered the meditation hall with all the other lay members and monastics, and I dropped all of my utensils, and nearly dumped a glassful of water onto the tiled floor in front of the meditation mats. My embarrassment was only heightened when everyone turned to see the source of the noise. I wanted to cover my face, and I was afraid I would never learn how to truly “eat mindfully.” Although no one said anything to me at the time, they did continue to watch me intently as I rushed to find the next available cushion to sit on. Later, when I had the time to express my concerns to Br. Bảo about my inability to “do Mindfulness ‘right’”, he merely smiled and said simply, “That’s why it’s called a ‘practice!’” It is, therefore, through the ritualistic activity of taking and eating meals together as a group that competing voices make claim to the look and feel of the practice.

What I mean by the look and feel of the practice is seen by the types of foods consumed at the monastery. Localization assigns meanings for practitioners at Magnolia Grove, and occurs with the fusion of different foods, the importance placed upon reflection and silence, and the emphasis on the Five Contemplations mentioned above. For instance, while many of the foods were inspired by Vietnamese cuisine such as vegan *phở* (a noodle

soup dish consisting in this case of tofu, noodles, vegetables, and an array of spices and herbs), there were instances where the food cooked catered to a “Western” palate with dishes including pancakes and honey, french fries, and tofu burgers. Food and mealtimes are important aspects to the experience at Magnolia Grove as it provides a time to enjoy an activity in quiet reflection as a community as well as enjoying an opportunity to experience cuisine from other countries or cuisine from a member’s home country which may be hard to find otherwise.

As stated previously, Magnolia Grove participants and members are encouraged to follow a vegan diet which prohibits the consumption of animal meats and products derived from animals such as milk, cheese, and eggs. This dietary restriction is a major part of the eating ritual in the tradition as one of the key components of Buddhism is a commitment to the non-injury of sentient beings. But, what is interesting to note, is that these rituals and dietary restrictions are by no means adhered to fully at all times. As one of my informants later told me, the monastery was allowed to have “cheat days” every so often, although such a privilege of breaking their dietary restrictions is considered a rare treat.

For instance, during my general stay, I witnessed a few times where the vegan diet was not followed. One evening during my stay, I noticed a few of the monastics missing from the usual activities. When I inquired about where they were, one of the nuns replied that several of the monastics had gone into town to “get dinner.” I thought this was surprising since there is a “cooking team” assigned to make all the meals at the monastery with different people taking turns on a routine basis. Imagine my surprise and utter delight when I saw the monastery’s white pickup truck stopping near the veranda to unload several boxes of Pizza Hut pizza! And this was not just any kind of pizza specially prepared for the monastery, these pizzas were loaded with vegetables, marinara sauce, and gooey cheese. It goes without saying that some of the monastics were just as happy as I was about having a “pizza party” complete

with cheesy pizza and soft drinks. Some of the monastics had confided with me that cheese was, in fact, one of their favorite foods they missed the most since becoming a monastic.

Another example of the rules “being bent” at times also comes from personal experience in the field. As my embarrassing story about trying to remain quiet during “Mindful Eating” shows, usually the first half of meals are held without anyone speaking or having any sort of conversation with one another in order to focus on the food in front of them. But, these rules are bent at times given the circumstances, and both monastics and lay members have been known to communicate during the “Noble Silence” without saying a word at all.

After about a week of living at the monastery full-time, I had grown accustomed to eating as quietly as possible, and I felt that I was making considerable progress in this area. I had gotten my meal one day during lunch, and I sat down at the dining room table with a group of young nuns around my own age. We were contemplative and reflective when we sat down to our vegan dish of rice, spiced vegetables, and tofu, and all was proceeding according to the ascribed ritual of “Mindful Eating.” Then, I bit into an exceptionally hot pepper, and my face immediately turned a deep rouge color while my eyes began crying almost instantly. Trying to regain my composure by covering my mouth with my hand, one of the young nuns sitting next to me noticed what was happening, and began gesturing to the same type of pepper on her plate and pretending to “fan” her tongue with her hand. The other nuns also took notice of what was going on, and a fit of silent giggles went around the table while the nun sitting on my other side began poking me in the ribs jokingly. “So much for being ‘Noble’ during this ‘Silence’.” I remember thinking to myself after the redness in my face subsided, and my vision finally cleared from the tears falling from my face.

What these stories show is that the boundaries set by rituals such as dietary restrictions and mealtime activities are not static and unchanging. The reason one monastic

gave me for such “cheat days” was the fact that, as part of classic Buddhist teachings, one was supposed to follow a “Middle Path” between the extremes of indulgence and deprivation. Overall, due to limitations of time in the field, I was unable to get a firm answer as to why the rules were “bent” in some instances, but not in others.

While eating certain foods may be flexible at times, as Marian told me one evening, the rituals are “way stricter” in the Thích Nhất Hạnh monastery in France, Plum Village, where the main institution for the practice is located. This is an aspect that needs to be further studied by scholars to see why some boundaries are bent or broken in some areas, but not others. This case study provides an example of this topic. Rituals, therefore, may have been put into place as a way to bring order into the social lives of its adherents, but it is not always practiced without its contentions.

SITE OF CONTENTION: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A PROBLEM ARISES?

Therefore, while rituals bring a sense of structure, order, and coherence in the daily lives of the “Mindfulness” practitioners, it is not without its tensions. One of my informants, Bethany, is a mother of small children, and had spoken to me about some of the difficulties of practicing the tradition in a social space characterized by highly ritualized activities. She said to me one day as we sat on one of the many stone benches that are situated around the grounds, “And yet, it’s hard because... the ritual of the...adult piece is so highly ritualized that there’s not space, not a lot of space to... communicate about this and how we can work to, ya’ know [accommodate children].”

She went on to say that, even though they had had some rough times and misunderstandings for various reasons, she in no way regrets raising her children in this tradition, and exposing them to the practices espoused by Thích Nhất Hạnh and his followers, rather than remain in their former Christian tradition. Thus, she adds, when speaking of a

particular situation between her family during one of the retreats they had attended in the past:

When that all happened, there was a monastic here... he was really wonderful. And we *talked* about it, and I think it's something that they struggle with and... at all of the monasteries. [And] wherever he is, he ultimately felt like it was, really *valuable* to... ideally is someone... that practices regularly at the monastery... but to *contract out* someone that takes over---because...they just don't have the *capacity*....there's no *anger* directed at *one* person. [It's just] still mystery to me how you kind of *process* things within such a highly ritualized thing to be able to really build [connections]--- but I still trust [in them].

This is to say that, while rituals can bring a sense of togetherness, belonging, and order to the practice of “Mindfulness”, tensions inevitably arise when different people from formerly different religious traditions come together for a shared purpose in a particular social space.

Bethany informed me of her distress in that the “adult spaces” at the monastery was not always an easy area to introduce small children, and since the “Children’s Program” at Magnolia Grove is still in its infancy, this was where difficulties and misunderstanding can come to fruition. What is important in this instance is that, in other traditions in places where Buddhism is openly visible like Japan, China, Malaysia, or Vietnam such ideas like a “Sunday School” or “Children’s Program” is not as common as it is in the United States until colonialism and globalization occurred (Yust 2006:338). The successes of such things as “Children’s Programs” or “Sunday schools” in recent years attests to the various concerns of what is expected of religious institutions by its lay members. Rather than seeing these implementations as something “from the West”, these programs are seen as essential elements of the Buddhist experience. Not having adequate resources to achieve this, Bethany suggested that the monastery bring in someone “from outside” to further strengthen the children’s program so that the “adult space” remains uninterrupted while her children receive their own space for practice.

Having no sufficient space for practitioners' and retreatants' young children is a site of

contention which is felt by both the parents and their offspring. However, it should be noted that, having a lack of funds and resources to build up such programs could be contributed to the fact that Magnolia Grove, out of all of the other Plum Village Centers in the United States and around the world, is the youngest monastery. Therefore, they are still in the initial stages of developing well-run and well-financed programs like the one mentioned previously. At present, Magnolia Grove is constantly in a state of change as they undertake various constructions such as the larger meditation hall, bell tower, and other such expansions. Having their resources stretched in a myriad of directions may have made it difficult to cultivate things like the “Children's Program” with efficiency. Once Magnolia Grove has firmly established itself as a practice center in the coming years, it will be interesting to revisit this site of contention to see if any changes have been made in this area.

Tensions, disagreements and misunderstandings occur in every religious space, indeed in every social space where people gather together. What is important to note here is that, for my informant, raising two small children while also pursuing a lucrative career in “drama therapy” alongside her husband presented a somewhat unique set of experiences and obstacles they had to navigate in their lives. For example, while specific “Mindfulness” practices can be characterized by a “highly ritualized thing”, as Bethany said, it is by no means strictly enforced at all times. When asked about her family’s participation of the practices in their daily life, Bethany responded that they did not practice such things as an hour of Sitting Meditation every day, but that they did it often enough that her kids self-identified as “Buddhist” when asked by their friends. It is through the rituals that have been incorporated into their lives that has changed how the family views both their former religious affiliation with Christianity and their newer affiliation with Buddhism.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER: HOW RITUALS FORM LOCALIZATION PROCESSES

Some rituals, such as bowing and meditation, have many justifications for practitioners as to why such events are important in the practice. Some localization processes, however, may cause contentions within the group such as the lack of a “Children's Program” in Bethany's case. Going through each of the rituals in detail illustrates a broader trend within this tradition and other traditions which have taken roots in the United States which involves religious blending of worldviews, namely Christian and Buddhist practices.

In addition, it is not just Christians using imagery and familiar practices that incorporate their tradition into the Buddhist practice, but the founder of “Mindfulness”, Thích Nhất Hạnh, also brings in imagery, symbols, and interpretations derived from Christianity. For example, in a public talk he gave in 2002 in Memphis, Tennessee titled “Walking with Peace and Presence”, he stated:

If you walk [mindfully] with every step, the energy of mindfulness and concentration will be there to support you. And the place where you walk becomes the pure land of the Buddha or the kingdom of God. The blue sky, the beautiful vegetation, the face of a child, the flower blooming -- all these wonders belong to the kingdom of God, to the pure land of the Buddha.

The images most readily discernible by those growing up or adhering to Christianity are the images of the “kingdom of God” which is a phrase used in Christian literature, poetry, and in the Bible to describe the wonders of nature or in reference to heaven itself as the place where God dwells. The “pure land of the Buddha” on the other hand, is a direct reference to the Buddhist tradition which believes that a bodhisattva (a Buddhist celestial being) by the name of Amitābha created a “Pure Land” where believers are said to go as a final stopping place before achieving full enlightenment or *nirvana*.

Rituals are indeed an important and visible manifestation of boundary constructions and contestations within Magnolia Grove. As they are, by definition, patterned action, rituals such as the ones described above offer researchers and scholars a chance to repeatedly

observe how informants shift, change, and react to competing influences from other individuals and groups. But, rituals and worldviews are not the only markers for boundaries at Magnolia Grove. The role and use of language is also a site where boundaries are created, maintained, and reinstated.

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN FORMING BOUNDARIES

Language is also an element of an individual's "localization process" as different groups of people utilize language in different ways and at different times. I agree with the notion that communication and representation are two "primary purposes of language" (Joseph 2004:15). In terms of communication, the author asserts, language provides a means to interact with others for it being "impossible for human beings to live in [complete] isolation." Communication among groups of peoples is important as it relays information, social mores, and make connections with others. For the members of Magnolia Grove, communication leads individuals to construct and to transform the representation of the world around them.

The switching from Vietnamese to English by some participants is done seamlessly and without much conscious effort from the actor, while others, like some of the resident monastics, for instance, often struggle with communication with "Western Lay-Friends" as their mastery of English is limited. Others prefer to or are able to only participate in English when it comes to rituals, chanting, or "Dharma Sharing." From my observations and interviews, language is a very visible and a very important part of the experience at Magnolia Grove.

For example, the religious services held at the monastery during retreats and the aforementioned "Day of Mindfulness" on Sundays are times where languages come together in various ways depending on the circumstances. While I was living at the monastery for my

two week general stay, almost every day we had “Dharma Talks” like the ritual described previously. In terms of language use, many times during that stay, the talks, audio recordings, and videos were entirely given in Vietnamese. Since I am not proficient in that language, a headset was provided for me and two other “Western Lay-Friends” staying there. This headset was connected to an audio system with a microphone. One of the monastics who was fluent in English acted as our interpreter, translating the day's message as it was being spoken. If the headphones and audio system was not used, a monastic would just gather those unfamiliar with Vietnamese and provide an interpretation for us by speaking softly.

Interestingly, I also observed times where a “Dharma Talk” would be held in Vietnamese during a “Day of Mindfulness”, and the Vietnamese lay members of the younger generations often opted to listen to the talk in English rather than in Vietnamese. When I questioned Leah about it, she commented on the fact that English was her first language, and that she only used Vietnamese to talk to her parents. For her, she was much more comfortable using English with her friends and at school, than she was using Vietnamese.

But, not all of the younger Vietnamese or Vietnamese-American lay members I spoke to at the monastery felt the same way about their “family’s language”, as Leah called it. Jane, for instance, enjoyed being able to practice Vietnamese at the monastery. She told me that she listens to the various talks and activities in Vietnamese, and she picks out words she recognizes to help her learn the language better. If there was a word or concept she did not know, she would look up the word later, or use the context of the talk to help her understand the Vietnamese she found difficult.

It is not just the Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American lay members that benefit from the use of both languages at the monastery, though. During my general stay of two weeks, one of the main “attractions” I offered for the monastic community was the chance to practice English with a native speaker. Being a woman, I had the chance to help the nuns much more

than the monks as I was not allowed into the monk's dormitory due to the rule of gender separation in the living quarters so I am only able to talk about teaching English to the sisters at Magnolia Grove.

The monastics attended English language classes once or twice a week, with a tutor coming in and teaching them English grammar, vocabulary, and conversation skills while also assigning “homework” and tasks for the monastics. I was even called on to lead a couple of the English classes for the sisters during my extensive stay. During that occasion, I went over pronunciation, reading comprehension, and taught them the children’s song “The Itsy Bitsy Spider.” I found out from Bill that, while more of the sisters attended these classes, the brothers, on several occasion “all seemed to be very busy doing other things” instead of attending class.

While I couldn't be there to confirm the differences in attendance between the monks and the nuns, I did take note that there were several “levels” of English classes for the monastics depending on their language proficiency. The class that I was asked to help out with, for example, was considered an “advanced” class, and could converse relatively easy with one another, and with myself, in English. I helped them with pronunciation, specific grammar points, and reading comprehension. There are other instances besides language and culture classes where the choice of language is important as well.

This example of language switching at the monastery comes from the “Holiday Retreat.” During the New Year’s Eve celebration event, there were recitation of prayers to “mindfully welcome the new year” as one of the nuns called it. A long recitation ritual regarding giving thanks and homage to one’s friends and family as well as to other beings such as various bodhisattvas and “spiritual and physical ancestors” was given completely in English by a “Western Lay-Friend” retreatant in attendance. Directly afterwards, the same recitation was given in Vietnamese as well. This back and forth between English and

Vietnamese is part of the identity of Magnolia Grove as its activities and rituals are carried out in such a way as to not exclude anyone on the basis of language whether it be English or Vietnamese.

Another example of the importance of language at the site comes from my interactions with Kỳ. During the “Holiday Retreat”, Kỳ participated in the “Dharma Sharing” activities solely in English, and conversed mainly in English as well. But, in his interview response, he mentioned that he preferred to practice “Mindfulness” in Vietnamese as it helped him to connect with his ancestral home. He stated that he could “barely speak the [Vietnamese] language” since he grew up in the United States, but he chants in Vietnamese as “there are many things that you just could not translate into English...the chanting is much more beautiful [in Vietnamese].” For Kỳ, language is an important aspect of connecting with his ethnicity as well as connecting with another understanding of what “Mindfulness” is by chanting in Vietnamese.

These are all examples of what is known as “code-switching” which in a broad sense means, “utterances [that] draw to differing extents on items which come from more than one language and which are combined in different ways” (Romaine 2000:55). By using more than one language at the site, the members, practitioners, and visitors at Magnolia Grove are able to communicate and relate to a wider range of individuals than if they only spoke one language. Therefore, these “codes” or languages used are an important area to construct, reassess, and reaffirm boundaries because “codes transduce communicative intentions into utterances, and utterances into interpretations” (Alvarez-Caccamo 1998:42). These interpretations, in my ethnographic work, point to the use of Vietnamese as a mechanism to achieve various goals such as communication among groups, reaffirming an ethnic Vietnamese identity, and to create and maintain the boundary between their “family language” and English.

By using a mixture of Vietnamese and English in informal conversations as well as in formal religious events such as Dharma talks and discussions, a boundary is made based on linguistic competency between those who can speak Vietnamese, and those who cannot. Like the examples mentioned above, code-switching serves the purpose of bringing groups closer together. For example, family groups with other family groups who speak the same language are brought together, the Vietnamese speaking monastics learning English as a way to relate to their “Western Lay-Friends”, family groups becoming closer by using their home country's language. But, the use of language also forms a boundary between those who speak the language, and those who do not in that, if a discussion is completely in Vietnamese, English speakers rely on an interpretation by a monastic in which some of the message may be “lost in translation.” While language is an important marker to look at when analyzing boundaries between and among groups, interpretations about “what 'Mindfulness' is” is a point of division that also leads to the formation of groups. Thus I will now discuss how bringing in “psychosocial” elements to define and use “Mindfulness” are also sites where boundaries are made and changed.

THE PSYCHOSOCIAL SPHERE: BRINGING IN NON-RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS

Although Thích Nhất Hạnh is considered a Zen Buddhist monk, there are facets of the “Mindfulness Practice” and “Mindful Living” he advocates that appeals to a broader, non-religious audience that, in its own way I argue, is how one potentially constructs meaning for their “Mindfulness” practice. For Bill and Victoria, for example, bringing in an element such as psychology into the fold of this tradition is one way they make “Mindfulness” locally relevant in their lives. The examples below illustrate how some of my informants answered the concern for maintaining “mental fitness” within themselves or within a larger group.

For example, Bill spoke to me at length about what he called “Packaging Buddhism”

where “the Buddha is taken out of Buddhism” in the sense that references to Buddhism or Buddhist practice are taken out of the explanation of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s “Mindful Living” practices. He said to me during our conversation:

I guess some of the “Mindfulness” [practices] and some of the Buddhist life skills that they practice here [are turned] into a non-Buddhist package and...promoting it in the community. Like schools, they’re like really, there’s a big effort...to put together programs to be made available to schools. Just non-violence... anger-management type things ya know that type of thing. There’s not the word Buddhism or religion or anything like that, but it’s just... peace-building in a way, y’know.

So, rather than going door-to-door “evangelizing”, as Bill put it, Thích Nhất Hạnh and his followers are making an effort to bring in useful activities into schools and other public places without the intent of converting people to their particular religion.

This is an important shift in the shape of how this tradition is practiced both in the United States and elsewhere. The “taking Buddha out of Buddhism” as Bill commented to me at one point is similar to the views shared by the aforementioned work on Israeli practitioners. In other words, it is the blurring of boundaries of the religious field and the non-religious public field that is important for scholars to continue to study as it changes the way people interact with the religion in different ways and in different spaces. Instead of taking Buddhist teachings and beliefs to schools as a way of “spreading the word” about the religion in the hopes that people would convert, Magnolia Grove and other similar practice centers in this tradition bring the meditative practices of Buddhism such as deep breathing and constant awareness to schools and other institutions without mentioning the fact that these practices are based in a particular religion they are encouraged to follow.

Another example of this kind of localization process comes from one of my informants, Victoria. As stated previously, Victoria is a university-educated woman studying to get her PhD in the mental health field. When I asked her about her spirituality and her thoughts on Buddhism, she strongly opposed labeling herself as a “Buddhist” because to her,

“being Buddhist” was “missing the point” of the message of “Mindfulness.” Rather than viewing the tradition in terms of the benefits it provides people in a religious or spiritual sense, she commented:

I don't even see it as a spiritual practice. I see it as getting your mind in shape almost like you get your body in shape...there is *nothing* out there to get your mind in shape. And, I have been to therapy before, and it was largely unhelpful.

For Victoria, the practice of “Mindfulness” was not for any spiritual or religious gain, but a gain in a sense of psychological peace of mind that she could not find through other means. For her, “Mindfulness” was synonymous with being an emotionally sound and balanced human being. But, retreatants and non-ethnic members were not the only ones to comment on the usefulness of such practices and traditions as Vietnamese immigrants and refugees also carried a similar conviction with their own spiritual traditions, regardless of whether or not they followed the Thích Nhất Hạnh approach.

For example, in a case study involving refugees fleeing from the economic, political, and social strife in Vietnam from 1975-2005, religion and ritualistic practices provided positive benefits for individuals during the relocation processes they had to endure (Dorais 2007:57). In particular, the author inserts parts of informants' interviews to show the importance of rituals and religious practices for Vietnamese refugees relocating in Montreal, Canada. For one man in the case study, going to the “pagoda” or Buddhist religious institution provided “a place where one can find inner peace and heal moral wounds”, while another woman claimed that the reason so many people flocked to the Canadian pagodas was that “[a] religious life is the only way to remain mentally balanced (Dorais 2007:65). Like Victoria, these individuals are also seeking psychological and emotional benefits from practicing their tradition. This is important because, while these practitioners may be seeking spiritual salvation in a traditional sense, they are also seeking non-religious advantages for following the tradition.

Individuals construct their own localization process to interpret “Mindfulness” meaningfully. By implementing elements from both a religious and a secular background like psychology, “Mindfulness Practice” brings together a diversity of people, ideas, and worldviews that may not have necessarily intersected otherwise. It is important for scholars of Buddhism to take a look at such interwoven webs of connections to understand the larger picture of the changing landscape of Buddhism and its practitioners.

SITE OF CHANGE: EXPANSION OF MAGNOLIA GROVE'S FUNCTIONS AND PRIORITIES

The function of the Magnolia Grove Monastery plays an important role as a site where localization occurs because different people use the site with different goals and expectations in mind that they hope to achieve from participating in retreats, daily activities, and other events that take place. With such a variety of people ranging from a religion-oriented monastic to someone who described himself as “anti-religious”, Magnolia Grove is a site that is useful to the study of Buddhism and Buddhist institutions within the United States.

The functions of a site influence how people view themselves as they participate in that environment, with the reverse being true as well. People define the space they interact with on a daily basis or during retreats and other events at the site. Bill asked me one evening about “what was different about this experience [going to the Holiday Retreat] that was different from before [my two week, general stay]”, and after thinking about it for a moment, I replied, “The energy’s different because the people are different.” He agreed.

This “change in energy” I referred to in my conversation with Bill is important because it attests to the change in the use of space at Magnolia Grove. Along with the site physically expanding and altering, the priorities and identity of the site also changes as more people come to practice at the site. The change in priorities occurred as Magnolia Grove

expanded from its beginning as a gathering place for Vietnamese families interested in reproducing their culture, to a full-fledged Buddhist monastery following a specific tradition. According to the Magnolia Grove website, the 120 acres of land in rural Batesville, Mississippi was purchased by a small group of “committed individuals and families” about ten years ago. During this time there were many construction projects going on around the site as these groups of individuals were building by hand the meditation hall and adjoining buildings. Bill described to me what Magnolia Grove was like when he had first come to the site:

[Magnolia Grove was] a Vietnamese community center kind of thing where people would come out here on the weekend, and... hang out with their friends, and work on the place a little bit. Ya' know, they'd do some work...play, have a big dinner... and a little bit of Buddhism.

Expanding upon this statement, Bill elaborated that by “Vietnamese community center” he meant that people would come on the weekends to volunteer on things that needed to be done, and spent time together as a community of Vietnamese families.

Upon reflecting, Bill stated, “It was just a big, fun thing. On a Saturday night, and Sunday, everybody shows up, eats, and talks Vietnamese, and has a good time.” So, while there was “a little bit of Buddhism” happening at the site, Magnolia Grove was still in the process of growing and changing to include a more structured place to practice “Mindfulness”. Therefore, although the original inspiration of the families and groups of individuals who purchased the land was to build a mindfulness practice center in the Thích Nhất Hạnh tradition, the dream would take several years before it came to fruition.

In addition, there was a lack of formal structure in terms of Buddhist practice due to the fact that there were no resident monastics at Magnolia Grove until about two and a half years ago, as Bill related to me during our interview. Until the monastics came to live at the site, “everybody was on their own so there was not a big, organized Buddhist practice here.”

Even then, however, Magnolia Grove was still an important part of the wider Vietnamese community as it provided a place for families to come together to maintain connections with their home country by eating familiar foods, speaking the language, and participating in events relevant with their Vietnamese ethnic identity.

Magnolia Grove became an official “Mindfulness” practice center in October 2005, according to the website, and has living at the site around 40-45 monks and nuns respectively. Because there now was a permanent monastic presence at Magnolia Grove, the site now had a sense of religious structure that otherwise did not exist to such an extent prior to their arrival. The monks and nuns scheduled a firmer daily routine of eating, walking, and working meditation practices as well as formalized Dharma discussions and talks. This changed the “feel” of the institution, I argue, in that, while it still catered to the wider Vietnamese community in the region, it now had a structured religious aspect to the site with the monastics living there.

In addition, due to the growth of the site and its official recognition as a “Mindfulness” practice center, Magnolia Grove saw an increase in the numbers of non-Vietnamese to the site as they began hosting a variety of retreats, talks, and stays for lay practitioners. With the influx of people came an influx of donations from sources outside of the Vietnamese community. In other words, as Bill succinctly put it, “[Magnolia Grove] makes money simply by being itself.”

Now, the site is growing even more as there are new construction projects going on such as a new bell tower and a larger meditation hall that will be able to accommodate up to 1000 people. But, compared to Deer Park and Blue Cliff, the other two official “Mindfulness” practice centers in the United States, Bill also commented that Magnolia Grove is still considered “way, way more Vietnamese than the others.” This is an important view because it shows that, although Magnolia Grove is indeed expanding its base members

by means of retreats and functions, it still retains many of the aspects and priorities that helped to build the site in the first place. It is this simultaneous increase of non-Buddhist and non-Vietnamese members along with the large number of Vietnamese and Buddhist practitioners that brings about internal diversity and an ambiguity to the interpretation of “Mindfulness.” In other words, the use of the site changes as different people have influenced it with their presence.

Thus, as seen in the examples stated above, some retreatants like Victoria use the site to maintain a healthy mental state, and chose not to associate the Thích Nhất Hạnh approach with anything she deemed “religious” or “spiritual” as she felt that such labels “isolated and excluded people”. Magnolia Grove was, for her, not a spiritual refuge, but a refuge based more on the psychological benefits that “Mindful Living” offered her in her life.

Others, like the resident monastics, utilize this site for strictly a religious purpose. As several monastics and informants revealed to me, unfortunately, Thích Nhất Hạnh and his followers have not always had the easiest time in their home country of Vietnam due to complications with the government and its view on the religion. Therefore, while the monastics do indeed use Magnolia Grove as a place to hone their spiritual practice, it is also a physical refuge for some of them who wished to simply, “be free” from society, as one resident sister told me during a conversation one day.

But, monastics are not the only ones seeking to “get away” from the pressures of society. Bill also talked about his life “in society” where he had a job, and was actively involved in the community he lived in. But, as he grew older, he wanted to “get away from it all,” and he traveled to the various “Mindfulness” practice centers that are found across the United States and France, and lived there for weeks at a time. Other retreatants and active members of Magnolia also shared similar views when I asked them what they liked about the monastery. For these people and people like them, Magnolia Grove acts as a kind of resting

place from the stresses and expectations of daily living in a modern society.

And for others still, Magnolia Grove provides a way to address the concern to “get closer to one’s roots.” As shown by Bill’s retelling of the early days of the site, the monastery not only acted as a religious center, but also a Vietnamese culture center for families to gather together as a community. By using the Vietnamese language in formal talks or language classes held at the monastery, eating a variety of Vietnamese food “from home”, and participating in culturally-specific events such as the Lunar New Year, some of the Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American informants I spoke with mentioned this as the reason for coming to the monastery. These activities are what Ebaugh and Chafetz (2000:393) term “ethnic reproduction through sociability”. It is through social events, the authors contend, that congregations consisting of a large number of practitioners from other countries are able to “assume various aspects of the community center model substantially as a response to members’ desire to reproduce ethnicity.”

The authors (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000:295) continue by giving examples from their own research. In a Buddhist temple catering predominantly to Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American Buddhist practitioners, eating Vietnamese foods, speaking to one another in Vietnamese whether in informal conversation or during language classes, and participating in traditional Vietnamese festivals and ceremonies are some of the ways ethnicity is produced and reassessed within the space.

This sentiment of “getting closer to one’s ethnic roots” is a visible function of Magnolia Grove as most of the signs around the institution are in both Vietnamese and in English, many of the discussions and talks are performed in Vietnamese, and much of the food consumed is cooked in a style similar to kinds found in parts of Vietnam. In one case, one of the people I spoke with “didn’t really care much” about all the “Vietnamese stuff” they had going on around the monastery.

Localization occurs because there are no firm boundaries separating what the site is used for in terms of seeking religious or secular benefits. With different people using the site for a variety of reasons, Magnolia Grove cannot be said to be a completely homogenous institution consisting of members all sharing the same ideals and expectations of doing things. Rather, it is this diversity of the functionality of the site that lends itself to localization occurring in the space.

As people's social spaces intersect from different backgrounds, some having grown up their entire lives within a Buddhist tradition, some returning to the tradition of their parents or grandparents when they grow up, and some coming into the tradition as an adult with no previous familial or background connection, scholars must take in the larger picture of the changing terrain of analyzing Buddhism and Buddhists in the United States.

V. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Ultimately, this project tells the story of my informants's lives as they practice at Magnolia Grove Monastery. It is a story about how different groups of people are able to come together at a common site, and practice the tradition of “Mindfulness” for different purposes. For the monastics and “Western Lay-Friends” alike, “Mindfulness” provides structure, solace, and peace in a fast-paced world. It is appealing to various groups due to its simplicity: all people can “do 'Mindfulness” because every sentient being is capable of breathing in and breathing out.

There are three large concerns that my informants continually discussed with me while I was at Magnolia Grove. These concerns are different depending on the informant's ethnic and family background, and included how to approach “Mindfulness” to achieve certain goals or outcomes. For some, their main concern was utilizing the practice for their families in a religious sense, while others were concerned about passing on their Vietnamese heritage to the next generation. And lastly, others focused on using the practice to maintain stability in their home life or in their academic life as students.

As stated previously, “Mindfulness” is made locally relevant to individual practitioners through what I termed “localization processes.” Things such as how practitioners interpreted “Mindful Living”, how they interpreted the rituals and meditative practices, and the language they used construct how an individual processed “Mindfulness” into something meaningful for them.

Like a joining of hands, different groups come together at Magnolia Grove as one *sangha* of monastics and lay members to practice “Mindful Living” in a way that promotes peace and community building across boundaries that have the potential to divide people like

gender, class, or ethnicity. Just as the right hand is just as useful as the left hand, it is important to give everyone a voice in saying what “Mindfulness” means to them.

For future research, this study on a Buddhist monastery in Mississippi also provides an entry point into other areas of research in my academic future such as providing a foundation point for a regionalism approach to the study of American Buddhism emphasized in the recent work *Dixie Dharma* (Wilson 2012). In this approach, Wilson (2012:38) considers five main topics for potential research projects in studies of American Buddhism including “1) regional distribution patterns within American Buddhism, 2) impact of regions on Buddhism, 3) Buddhist impact on regions, 4) regional differences within the same Buddhist lineage, and 5) differences between built environments.” Regionalism looks at how religious practitioners and religious traditions are affected by social surroundings, space, and local culture to bring about a holistic analysis. By highlighting the unique qualities and characteristics of Magnolia Grove and its place within the larger Batesville community, a foundation is created to expand this topic to address the larger subject of “mapping out” the different ways Buddhism is practiced in regional contexts such as the South is formed.

Also for future research, I believe scholars could look at the categories of “Convert Buddhism” and “Ethnic Buddhism” to see if the terms are still useful in today's society. In other words, with the advent of technology and increased reliability on global media and communication, are the terms “Ethnic Buddhism” and “Convert Buddhism” still representative of Buddhism and Buddhist practice in the United States? By using sites like Magnolia Grove, scholars can develop a better picture of the shape that “American Buddhism” is taking today.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Background Information? (Birthplace, Age, Education, Family members etc)
2. How has living in the "South" changed your perception of the United States?
3. Describe your friends. Do they also follow Buddhism/Thich Nhat Hanh's approach
4. Describe your spirituality at this time in your life?
5. How did you learn about Thich Nhat Hanh and Mindfulness?
6. What do you like about it? What do you not like about it? What aspects do you find difficult to understand or believe?
7. Has your spirituality or views on mindfulness practice ever caused tensions or misunderstandings between yourself, your friends, or your family? Please describe in detail.
8. Since coming to the United States (or following the Thich Nhat Hanh approach) how has your perception of Buddhism changed? What are some of the things that have remained the same? Why do you think changes have occurred/stayed the same?
9. When out in public, are there certain practices relating to religion such as dietary restrictions that you have to maintain since following the Thich Nhat Hanh approach of Mindfulness? If yes, is it difficult to practice such adherence in the South (as opposed to another place like New York for example)?
10. How do you feel/how did you feel about the many rituals or structured activities you participated in while at Magnolia Grove or similar Mindfulness Practice Centers? Was there ever a time where you felt "out-of-place" or isolated when participating in any of the practices such as Mindful Eating, Walking Meditation, chanting etc. Please describe this time in detail.
11. What is your favorite Mindfulness Practice? (Mindful Eating, Sitting Meditation, Working Meditation etc.) Why?
12. How do you feel/what do you think about during Walking Meditation? Are there any prayers, sayings, or mantras you say to yourself or out loud when doing this? Please describe.
13. (If Vietnamese/able to speak Vietnamese): If given a choice, would you prefer to chant/meditate etc. in Vietnamese or English? Why?
14. (If not Vietnamese): How do you feel about certain aspects of the practice that are done in Vietnamese (ex. Chanting)?
15. How has Buddhism impacted your life?

VITA

EDUCATION

- 2012 MA in Anthropology at University of Mississippi
- 2010 BA in International Studies- ASIA at Louisiana State University
- 2009 関西外国語大学 Kansai Gaidai University for Asian Studies

EXPERIENCE

- | | |
|--|-----------|
| Teaching Assistant, The University of Mississippi | 2011-2013 |
| Secretary for Louisiana State University's Japanese Language Society | 2009-2010 |
| Louisiana State University Desk Assistant (DA) | 2009-2010 |
| Academic Study Abroad in Japan | 2009 |

LANGUAGES

English: Fluent

Japanese: Intermediate

SKILLS AND CERTIFICATIONS

Certification of completion: Best Practices for Teaching Online (UM workshop)

Technical: Basic functions and commands in MS Word, PowerPoint, Excel, Pages, and Keynote. Ability to use Mac, Linux and Windows OS. Experience using Blackboard.