

Listening to the Buddhists in Our Backyard: Recentring the Marginalized, Welcoming the Unknown

Chenxing Han and Andrew Housiaux

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Nervous and excited, we piled into the Suburban that would serve as our behemoth of a ride for the next week of temple visits and drove the twenty-five minutes to Chua Tuong Van, a Vietnamese Buddhist temple in Lowell, Massachusetts. With its yellow vinyl siding, white trim, and red roof, this building might be mistaken for a residential home were it not for the stone lions and Quan Am statue at the entrance, the golden dharma wheel and colorful dragons adorning the rooftop, the large marble sign with marigold letters announcing the temple name and address. Dr. Tham Tran, the temple’s youth group leader, greeted us with a warm smile at the front door.

“Welcome,” she exclaimed, ushering us in from the cold. “You can call me Tham. Please take off your shoes here. Thank you for bringing these oranges! We can offer them to the Buddha.” We followed her through the reception room to the expansive main hall. The students gasped upon seeing the elaborate altar area flanked by golden parasols and bronze bells, filled with offerings of polished fruit and vibrant flowers, and crowned by a gold-robed seated Buddha statue. The wall behind the statue was entirely covered by a painted mural: deer and rabbits grazing on lush foliage, an azure lake with gray mountains in the distance, a majestic bodhi tree towering over this nature scene. The mural extended to the lofty ceiling, which had been transformed into a summer-blue sky with cottony clouds.

“Shall we bow together?” Tham asked. She demonstrated how to make a full-body prostration and we followed suit in respectful imitation. Tham then gathered us into a circle to lead a mindful breathing practice based on the writings of Thich Nhat Hanh. The abbot of the temple, [p178] Thich Tham Hy, then delivered a dharma talk in Vietnamese that Tham translated. For the remainder of the morning, the two of them patiently answered our many questions.

After inviting us to sit at the long table in the reception room, Ven. Hy poured us each fragrant cups of jasmine tea. One of our students sighed with nostalgia. The tea reminded her of her grandmother’s home in Japan. By this point, we had learned that Ven. Hy was Tham’s uncle. Sitting before this brown-robed monk and his niece, we felt ourselves an extension of their family. The student who spoke of her Buddhist grandmother spotted a miniature Zen garden on a dresser by the dining table. Admiring the bamboo rake in the sand box, she asked, “Wow, where did you get this?” Ven. Hy didn’t miss a beat. “Amazon!” Hearty laughter all around. We shared more in common than we’d thought.

Strangers made kin, in the span of a few hours. You can see it in the photos: we are beaming, delighted by these new connections.

Whose Buddhism?

So began “Listening to the Buddhists in Our Backyard” (L2BB), an immersive, experiential study of Buddhism with six high school seniors at Phillips Academy, a boarding school in Andover, Massachusetts. The project emerged as a creative partnership between the two of us, a high school religious studies teacher with a background in experiential education (Andy) and a writer, educator, and advocate for the Asian American Buddhist community (Chenxing). For all of spring term 2022—the final ten weeks of these students’ secondary school education—we focused on learning about the tremendous diversity of Buddhism in the Merrimack Valley, an area north of Boston within a fifteen-mile radius of our campus. This part of Massachusetts is home to a range of Buddhist temples established by Khmer, Vietnamese, Thai, Lao, and Chinese immigrant communities.

The eight of us—six students, two teachers—grew up in multiple parts of the United States, as well as Brazil, China, France, and Japan. We came from a diversity of faith backgrounds—Catholicism, atheism, Protestant Christianity, varying levels of exposure to various sects of Buddhism. Over the course of the spring, we visited Khmer, Thai, Vietnamese, Lao, Chinese, and Nichiren Buddhist temples in the Merrimack Valley, as well as an insight meditation center and a Tibetan Buddhist temple in the Cambridge, Massachusetts area. We spoke with a religiously diverse group of divinity students, many of them practicing Buddhists.

In short, L2BB was a locus for intra- and interreligious encounter. As coteachers, we conceived of this project in response to what we consider a major, widespread mistake: the teaching of Buddhism (and especially [p179] American Buddhism) in ways that are completely divorced from living contexts.

Asian Americans make up over two-thirds of American Buddhists.¹ However, as Allison Truitt emphasizes in her recent book, *Pure Land in the Making: Vietnamese Buddhism in the US Gulf South*, pedagogically limited approaches to the study of Buddhism contribute to the ongoing erasure of these communities: “I realized [that] Vietnamese Buddhists were overlooked in multiple ways . . . Buddhism as taught to U.S. students emphasized the ancient past, not the actual practices of contemporary Buddhist communities just a thirty-minute drive away.”² During our visit to Lumbini Buddhist Temple in Lawrence, Massachusetts, a Vietnamese American monk recalled the one day in ninth-grade world history when his class studied Buddhism; he saw little of his own community’s experience reflected in that day’s lesson plan.

Too often, the story of American Buddhism is told through white protagonists: Kerouac and the Beats, Thoreau and the Transcendentalists, contemporary secular mindfulness teachers. Too often, Buddhism is located solely in textbooks, in ancient history, in Asian countries, or in doctrine and philosophy. The implication is that living Buddhism can only be accessed through a study abroad program in Asia, or that “authentic” American Buddhism can only be found in white convert meditation centers.

What message does this send to the Asian American Buddhist individuals and sanghas in our own neighborhoods? To our Jodo Shinshu students whose temples are over a hundred years old, whose family members survived the incarceration camps of World War II? Or to our students who grew up engaging with Buddhist rituals under the guidance of relatives who immigrated from Bangladesh, Burma, Cambodia, China, Korea, India, Laos, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam, and elsewhere in Asia where Buddhism is practiced? What message does this send to our students of Asian heritage raised in non-Buddhist households, who are keen to learn more about Buddhism but confused by the erasure of Asians and Asian Americans from convert-Buddhist spaces, classroom lesson plans, and media representations?

A Pedagogy of Openness, Wonder, and Relational Accountability

In response to these questions, we made three significant pedagogical shifts when designing our program and choosing the center of gravity for our study of Buddhism: from past to present; from texts to communities; and from Asia to America. We centered the lives and experiences of our present-day Asian American Buddhist neighbors—the very people who [p180] comprise the majority of American Buddhists, yet remain marginalized in mainstream media and educational institutions.

Listening to the diverse group of monastics and laypeople in the Merrimack Valley—and immersing ourselves in the social, physical, and sensory environments of the temples they’ve built—was foundational to our learning. Our students fully engaged the sights, smells, sounds, textures, and tastes that come with inhabiting Buddhist spaces. Just as it has been for the vast majority of the world’s Buddhists across time and space, they encountered Buddhism through all their senses, in community—and not just through printed words on a page.

While a range of factors had to come together for this program to happen, we wouldn’t be writing this chapter if we didn’t believe that L2BB holds insights for other educational and religious contexts. It is true that L2BB only came to fruition after years of effort. It emerged from conversations between the two of us after the publication of Chenxing’s first book, *Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists*, whose journey from first interview to publication spanned nine years.³ Our six students were part of a larger program called “The Workshop” that Andy and other faculty spent several years advocating for and developing at their high school. Students in the Workshop were able to drop their usual five or six classes and choose from one of four interdisciplinary, collaborative, faculty-mentored learning projects. Freed from the typical high school schedule of forty-five-minute classes, our students were able to visit local temples for an entire morning, followed by a two-hour debrief session at a local café.

Even if the precise structure of L2BB may not be replicable, the pedagogical spirit certainly is. What is possible when intra- and interfaith engagements are grounded in openness, wonder, and relational accountability? Far more than an assessment by a single authority on how well we’ve done, certainly. (Indeed, none of the Workshop students received grades for the spring term.) As one of our students, Olivia Yang, wrote in an article for the international online journal *Buddhistdoor Global*: “All of the wonderful people we visited were generous enough to share their wisdom and open their doors to us without asking for anything in return . . . [M]y peers and I have been overwhelmed by a profound empathy and kindness that has redirected our academic, social, and emotional trajectories.”⁴

See, Think, Wonder

In preparation for that first temple visit to Chua Tuong Van, we studied Don Farber’s *Visions of Buddhist Life*. Examining this collection of photo-[p181]graphs featuring Buddhists from around the world, we returned repeatedly to a straightforward set of questions: What do you see? What does it make you think? What do you wonder?

This thinking routine from Harvard’s Project Zero (known as “See, Think, Wonder”) trained us to distinguish observation from inference, to attend closely to our sensory experience without immediately grasping for semantic meaning. Each day we practiced this slow looking, spending several minutes viewing these photographs in silence before articulating what we saw, what it made us think, and what we found ourselves wondering. This lay the groundwork for us to become more thoughtful observers and students of our local Buddhist communities. Like her

peers, Olivia connected this practice with Buddhist teachings on impermanence (*anicca* in the Buddhist liturgical language of Pali) and not-self (*anattā*) as she connected how “[e]ngaging with Buddhism through physical, bodied experiences has helped [her] to reimagine what it means to be a Buddhist in a world that is constantly being rewritten... The acknowledgement of impermanence in all its forms—in the retelling of history, in the understanding of the self—is essential to developing the flexibility needed to build practices of kindness and understanding.”⁵

See, Think, Wonder—observing with the senses, reflecting on these observations, and articulating questions that arose from our witnessing and contemplation—thus became a way to cultivation deeper compassion. When we paid attention well, when we observed slowly and took things in, we could respond to our environment with an open-hearted and broad-minded curiosity. As we prepared for our visits, the students began to develop questions about the history of the temples and about the lives of the people we were going to meet. After a few visits, they discovered that even simpler questions—“What is this?” “Who comes here?”—often led to richer answers. By relinquishing our attachment to the questions we wanted to ask, we made more room for the questions our hosts wanted to answer, for the stories they wanted to tell.

Be Comfortable Saying “I Don’t Know”

As teachers who were experimenting with an adaptive and emergent curriculum, we made plenty of mistakes over the course of this project. In the very early planning stages, we imagined temple visits in Boston, not fully aware of the diversity of local communities in our own backyard of the Merrimack Valley. We planned a boatload of readings on the usual topics—the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path—before replacing them with orienting texts such as Carol Stratton’s *What’s What in a Wat* that would help us navigate the primarily Southeast Asian, Theravada [p182] Buddhists spaces we would be visiting.⁶ We underestimated how overwhelming it would be to visit so many Buddhist communities in the span of eight consecutive days. We questioned our skillfulness in addressing complicated interpersonal dynamics between the students, as well as moments of tension during temple visits (when an elder’s views on sexuality or mental illness clashed with our own, for example).

When faced with the discomfort of working through these mistakes as best we could, we found grounding in eight words that the students had committed to the whiteboard on day one:

GROUP NORMZ

Be comfortable saying “I don’t know”

These words guided us all spring. As the social pressure to appear smart receded and the wish to learn together grew, the students embraced this norm more and more. As teachers, we also stepped back from dispensing knowledge or providing an immediate response to student inquiries. At the end of the term, one student reflected: “The best thing you did as teachers was not answering our questions. It made us dig. It made us curious. It was the first time in my high school career that I *wanted* to work this hard—because if I didn’t, I’d be letting down my fellow students, as well as the incredibly wise and compassionate people who gave us so much, without asking for anything in return.”

Over the course of the project, our students’ curiosity took them back to Chua Tuong Van several more times to engage with the youth programming there. In the process, they read Dr. Tran’s research about identity and cultural preservation among second-generation Vietnamese youth.⁷ They learned about the temple’s classes on traditional dance and Vietnamese language.

They respectfully bowed to the Buddha, then hugged Micky the temple cat with gleeful abandon (there's a selfie to prove it). They also noticed how the temple offered English-language services in addition to daily programming for the Vietnamese community. Their vision of Buddhism became more expansive—and more accurate—than would have been the case if they had just read texts, focused solely on Buddhist philosophy, or studied Buddhist history. They saw the Buddha's teachings as they were lived and embodied in practice: as deeply communal and interdependent in nature.

Who is the Teacher? Who is the Student?

After these immersive, interdependent experiences, the students sought to share their learning in ways that would engage the broader public and [p183] embody central themes and values that had emerged over the term. They designed and hosted two events: an online conference and an in-person symposium. The students crafted and led a Land and Lineage Acknowledgment, adapted from the Five Earth Touchings ceremony of the Plum Village community, which they learned about at Chua Tuong Van. They invited us to offer gratitude to the land and its ancestors; to our own religious and spiritual lineages; and to the parents, mentors, and teachers who have facilitated our learning and becoming. Recognizing the futility of trying to convey everything they learned, the students focused on three broad themes that emerged from the temples visits: *dāna* (generosity), youth groups, and adaptation to U.S. culture (described by one monastic as “mixing without dissolving”). To be precise, they didn't just *focus* on these three themes, but *enacted* them in wholehearted, embodied fashion.

Afterward, many attendees asked us if we had written the script, made the slides, and created the website that serves as a living archive for their work to date: ListenToLocalBuddhists.org. Not at all, we happily informed them. This was all the students' doing. We just facilitated the process and gave feedback when requested.

“I feel like a glorified lab rat!” exclaimed one of our students, who arrived at several revelations about her mother's relationship to Catholicism and her own conflicted experience of the religion over the course of L2BB. We nodded in agreement, an eight-headed anthropologist, a den of curious lab rats conducting an experiment with no clear end date. In Olivia's words:

It's daunting, but there's also a freedom in incompleteness. I'm beginning to find that one of the most important parts of learning is in the humility of knowing nothing. I can see it now: what I know now is vast compared to where I first started just a few weeks ago. And yet, at the same time, I know that I know nothing.

Buddhism embraces this humility and ceaseless diligence as a fundamental feature of life itself. The recognition of ignorance and the reconciliation of change exist in constant juxtaposition with one another. To me, the cultivation of generosity hinges on this delicate fulcrum. As I make decisions about the self and the community I want to envision, leaning *into* change will be profoundly valuable.⁸

Who is the teacher? Who is the student? Who is transformed in learning? The short answer is: *everyone*—if we recognize our fundamental interdependence, if we remember the joy

and freedom of not knowing. [p184] L2BB welcomes us into more nuanced and inclusive understandings—not just of American Buddhism, but of intra- and interreligious diversity more broadly.

American Buddhism is not a country club, but a vast family tree. Some branches are distant from others. Many branches have been overlooked. But all the members of this family tree share common roots. And the fruits of the tree are meant to benefit not just the family, but anyone and everyone seeking refuge and nourishment. You, too, are welcome here. We hope you'll stay a while.

¹ Pew Research Center. “Asian Americans: A Mosaic of Faiths.” Washington, D.C., July 19, 2012, 33.

² Allison Truitt, *Pure Land in the Making: Vietnamese Buddhism in the US Gulf South*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021, x.

³ Chenxing Han, *Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2021).

⁴ Olivia Yang, “Young Voices: What to Do with Impermanence,” *Buddhistdoor Global* (blog) (July 1, 2022). <https://www.buddhistdoor.net/features/young-voices-what-to-do-with-impermanence/>.

⁵ Yang, “Young Voices.”

⁶ Carol Stratton, *What's What in a Wat: Thai Buddhist Temples: Their Purpose and Design: A Handbook* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2010).

⁷ Tham Tran and Elizabeth Bifuh-Ambe, “Ethnic Identity among Second-Generation Vietnamese American Adolescents,” *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* 8, no. 2 (2021): 167–86.

⁸ Yang, “Young Voices.”