



The Previous Knowledge and Experiences about Buddhism: The American USAC Program Student's Perspectives Buddhism in Thailand Class During 2023-2024

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Abstract

This paper concerns the opinions of American Students who came to Thailand in the Program of University Studies Abroad Consortium or USAC on the Course of Buddhism in Thailand lectured by AJ. Phisit Kotsupho, the former Lecturer from Chiang Mai University during the years 2023-2024 at Chiang Mai University. With the purposes to correct the background or previous knowledge and experiences about Buddhism of those new generations from the Developed Country in Contemporary Time so that the USAC Staff Professors can manage the suitable program concerned the basic knowledge about Buddhism that will serve all student's requirements. The followings are their opinions towards previous knowledge and experience on Buddhism having been classified in to three groups: a new thing for them, knowing a little and having been studied in the college. These are 19 perspectives were permitted by authors to share for academic purpose by instructor.

Keywords: Knowledge, Experiences, Buddhism, USAC Program, Perspectives.



On Previous Knowledge on Buddhism

1. It's just the new thing to know

There are 7 persons when asked them to express their previous knowledge about Buddhism that they have never learn or know at all about this Eastern religion: Here are their opinions.

1.1 Sabrina Flores (sabflores7@gmail.com)

Coming to Thailand and into this class I know absolutely nothing about Buddhism except it's about freeing the mind, but while I was on a temple tour, I did learn not to point your toes at the Buddha.

1.2 Eva Hurley (18 January 2024)

When I reflect on my previous knowledge of Buddhism and Buddhist teachings, I realized that my education has been limited. I grew up in the Midwest region of the United States, where a strong majority of people are practicing Christians. I went to a Christian school until I was in high school, so it wasn't until my first year of college where I began to delve into the depths of Buddhism. I was able to take a class called Introduction to World Religions which provided me with a foundation to the beliefs and rituals which make up Buddhist culture.

I am familiar with the Four Noble Truths: suffering, the cause of suffering is craving, suffering can be ended through eliminating cravings, and the elimination of craving is the path to Niravana—also known as the release from the cycle of rebirth. I also learned about the birth story of the Siddhartha and how he reached benightment through The Middle Path and mediation, resulting in being called the Buddha. In contrast to Christian teachings which are centered around faith in God and love, the concepts of Buddha include detachment from desires, and meditative practices.

I have always been intrigued by Buddhism because of its strong emphasis on mindfulness and presence in everyday life. Its openness to adaptation and ability to compliment many different cultures and their local customs is also impressive to me. I recognize how Buddhism is expressed in diverse ways, yet all are accepted. Since I have arrived in Chiang Mai, I have been introduced to



the concept of The Middle Way which is finding a balance and moderation in life. I have been thinking about this concept a lot, especially because in the United States, our culture tends to have an “all or nothing” mentality, dependent on instant-gratification. I am eager to continue learning about practices, the lifestyle, and the history behind this unique religion.

1.3 Joe Ricker (1/17/2024)

Self-reflection: Previous knowledge of Buddhism Growing up in the United States, I have a relatively limited knowledge of Buddhism, Buddhist history and how the religion is practiced. My previous knowledge is based largely on the works of Thich Naht Hahn who is a Tibetan Buddhist currently practicing in France. Obviously, there are differences between different countries’ interpretation of the religion/philosophy but I have an understanding of the core tenets. Additionally, some of my knowledge of Buddhism has come from conversations with practicing Buddhists who I have interacted with in the last 12 days since arriving in Thailand. Prince Siddhartha Gautama was a prince in modern day India around 2500 years ago. His fate was prophesied to go in one of two directions: the king of a vast empire or a religious leader who would change the course of history. Despite the objections of his father who wanted him to rule the kingdom, he followed the second path. Prince Siddartha lived lavishly and had anything he desired, however he felt discontented with his life. He renounced his earthly possessions and privileges and left his home to become the Buddha. After an extended period of meditation, the Buddha became enlightened and achieved Niravana. As the Buddha, he professed the four noble truths to his disciples and followers. The first noble truth says that birth is suffering and that suffering is inherently a part of life. The second noble truth says that the cause of suffering is craving and desire. The third noble truth says that suffering can be eliminated through the elimination of craving/desire. The fourth and final noble truth says that the path to the elimination of craving/suffering is Niravana. Niravana is a state of complete detachment from the world and a state where suffering is



absent. It is seen as the end goal of meditation practices. The path to Niravana is often referred to as the eightfold path which outlines a way to live mindfully and as the Buddha taught. Because the four noble truths are so ingrained in the lives of many Buddhists, some of them consider Buddhism more of a philosophy or lifestyle rather than strictly a religion. The principles of the four noble truths can apply in every situation. Buddhism means very different things in different countries and religious sects.

Buddhism has integrated itself with other religions with the use of Hindu gods in India or the use of Shinto gods in Japan. Many Buddhists believe in rebirth as a life after death, while others view rebirth as every moment giving you a new chance at life. Many Buddhist monks or nuns strictly follow rules when it comes to abstaining from meat, sex, alcohol and other intoxicants. Many people who aren't monks or nuns don't follow these rules, but still use the four noble truths to guide their daily living. Buddhism has deeply affected Thailand's culture and has contributed largely to the mindful, collectivist culture.

1.4 Natalie Braga (18 January 2024)

My current relationship with and knowledge of Buddhism is rather limited. I was raised Catholic, and Buddhism was not a prominent religion within the communities I grew up in. Although I grew up with a few people who identified as Buddhist, I rarely discussed their beliefs with them. Additionally, I am originally from China which widely practices Buddhism, but I have studied more Confucianism than Buddhism in my past. However, outside of my limited personal experiences, I have taken some lessons in the teachings of the Buddha.

I took a Christianity and World Religions class while studying abroad in Ireland which was a very interesting perspective to learn from. Due to Ireland also being a highly Christian country, their perspectives on foreign religions were unique. We had a brief unit on Buddhism where I learned about some of the following:

Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama in the 5th or 6th century BCE. It is currently the 4th largest religion and exists primarily in China, Thailand,



Vietnam, Myanmar, etc. The Buddha means the awakened or enlightened one. Many of its primary principles are rooted in Siddhartha Gautama's experiences traveling around Nepal and viewing the inequities. This led to teachings including denouncing the caste system and that all human beings are equal. Buddhism also emphasizes the 4 Noble Truths: life is suffering, the cause of suffering is craving, the end of suffering comes with the end of craving, and there is path which leads one away from craving and suffering. These are the core pillars of Buddha's teachings.

In addition to studying Buddhist teachings, our class also compared the Buddha to Jesus to understand patterns and commonalities within religion. Comparisons included how Jesus was presented as a savior while Buddha was presented as a teacher. We also analyzed a piece by Jose Ignacio Cabeza, a Christian who wrote about how Buddhists view Christ and his mission. Overall, I obtained a baseline knowledge of Buddhism, but I am definitely eager to learn more about the religion and its teachings.

1.5 Melissa Garza

Buddhism Growing up in a Latin American culture I was always around the catholic religion and other Christian sects. I wasn't exposed to Buddhism until I traveled to China for the first time when I was 17 years old. This is when I learned about the "Buddhist way" and understood that it is much more than just a religion, it is also a philosophy and way of life. I became so intrigued by their school of thought that I began to question monks wanting to practice their English and what Buddhism meant to them. This is where the idea of mindfulness and meditation arose, and how they lived every day in a state of just "being" where every materialistic thing or construct became of no value and life truly became minimal. I also quickly realized that like other religions such as Christianity, there is more than one form or sector of Buddhism.

What made it even more interesting was how the different forms that are practiced are usually dictated by the country you are in. Therefore, the Bud-



dhism practiced in China can be quite different from the Buddhism practiced in Thailand, following different scriptures and even different Buddhas. Even the temples built for religious practice are completely different with such contrasting architecture. This also included mass variety in the art and sculptures that these temples are ordained with. In China, the temples were much grander and more intricate than in countries such as Japan. However, countries such as Thailand and Myanmar have a large incorporation of pagodas that I had never seen before. Being in Myanmar for the first time last year, I got to see yet another side of Buddhism that I had not seen before especially when it came to the thousands of beautiful pagodas in Bagan. I also saw that females could also be monks when I noticed young girls with shaved heads and pink robes running around the streets. This is where I discovered that many young orphaned or disadvantaged children or adults become monks to receive education and shelter. Without being a monk education for a lot of these communities is unachievable, and by partaking in Buddhism people can become highly educated and still can leave their monk life behind and enter into the real world and workforce.

1.6 Lexy Keim

If I am being completely honest, I do not really know a lot about Buddhism. That is why I wanted to take this class; to expand my knowledge and understanding. I did take a religion class a couple of years ago, but we learned about so many different religions that we were only able to briefly go over each one.

I do know that Buddhism is a religion that is based on the teachings of Buddha. I also know that it is very prominent in Asia, and I believe that there are different types of Buddhism. I also know that it is one of the largest religions in the world.

As for some of the beliefs, Buddhists do not worship a god but rather aim for enlightenment, or Niravana. They also believe that life is suffering and that nothing is permanent, and that “things” will not make you happy. Buddhists also believe in reincarnation. Life and death are a cycle, and you can be reborn as human, animal, or deity.



We were able to talk to a Monk for a few minutes when we did the temple tour last week and it was interesting to learn about his life. I know that they live at the temples, they must follow over 200 rules, they study and practice the Buddha's teachings, and meditate.

I know that the Buddha's teachings are referred to as the Dharma and if you practice those teachings, meditate, and live that lifestyle you have the potential to become free of suffering. Lastly, I know that Buddhists believe in karma. The best way to explain it is if you do good things then you will come back in a higher form but if you do bad things then you may be reborn in a lower form.

Overall, I know some of the basics but there is so much more I want to learn about Buddhism in this class and I am excited for it.

1.7 Wynn Thacker

Previous understanding of Buddhism, I don't know an awful lot about Buddhism from my home university, but in my Asian philosophy class we went over a brief synopsis. I know that Siddhartha Gautama is the name of the Buddha. I think that he used to be a prince or someone with a lot of wealth and status, and that the people surrounding him were well provided for, young, and healthy. For his early life he knew not of sickness or death. Then he left his home and, on his journey, saw three people: in one he saw sickness, in another he saw old age, and then he saw death. He was bothered by all of these things, and he sat under a Bodhi tree and meditated, and he was determined not to get up or eat or do anything until he found understanding, enlightenment. When he finally understood it all, he determined that life was full of suffering. He also learned that suffering comes from desire. When he reached this enlightenment after much meditation, he became the Buddha.

I learned that he never wrote down any of what he had learned, but his disciples made sure what he taught could spread around the world and that anyone could learn his teachings, for example the Four Noble Truths and The Eightfold Path.

I have taken a trip to the Buddhist university to sit in on an English



class and the class was talking about Dharma. Even though it was the topic of the class, I am not entirely sure what Dharma is (or is it Dhamma?), but I know it has to do with these truths. We talked a lot about different kinds of meditation, which I know is important in Buddhism. They talked about walking meditation, sitting meditation, slowing everything down and befriending your own mind, and learning to be comfortable in only your own presence.

I was told in this class that suffering has two types: suffering from discomfort and suffering from attachment. Being attached to something or to someone means that when you lost what you are attached to, you suffer, and you hurt. You will not be hurt if you are never attached to something you lose. You can also suffer because you are uncomfortable, you are hurt, or hungry, or sick. I don't know how the Buddha teaches to be free from this

2. Having known a little about Buddhism

There are 5 persons when asked them to express their previous knowledge about Buddhism that they have some knowledges but it's not much about Buddhism : Here are their opinions.

2.1 Grace Ertel (05 September 2023)

Every Sunday from when I was 10 years old to when I was 16, I went with my best friend Abbie and her grandma and my mom to a place of worship called cowboy church. It was a nondenominational space to sing and praise God and the pastor Johnny was a kind and thoughtful pastor who worked on the ranch where the church was. When I was 16, Johnny had a heart attack and passed away and we stopped going. I continued to keep my Christian faith that this church preached for a long time. I often thought of Johnny and the words he would say about an all loving and powerful God. I thought that would be the God I worship forever. When I was 18, my dad told me to read a book about Buddhism to expand my horizons on religion (my dad was not Christian). I remember almost scoffing at him as if there were any question in my mind that Christianity wasn't the path for me. But even in that moment, something in me was curious about Buddhism.



It has taken me until now, 4 years later, to open myself up to the idea of Buddhism being something I really want to adopt into my own life. I have very recently stopped identifying as a Christian. It is strange to not have that be a part of my identity anymore but I am excited to see where my newfound more open mind will guide me. My dad one time bought a Buddha garden statue at a yard sale and it sat on our porch. All I knew about the Buddha was from this statue- that he was a happy, plump, and seemingly loving guy. My dad has told me about Buddhist monks and the meditation and karma aspects of Buddhism and that's about all my previous knowledge of Buddhism. He told me that karma plays a huge role in life- be a good person and people will be good to you; do the right things and goodness and rightness will come back to you. I think this is a part of karma, but I can already tell from what I have learned here that there is a lot more to it.

I am so excited to learn the historical importance of Buddhism as well as all the aspects this spirituality focuses on not only for myself, but to share with the people from my home as well. I think it would be awesome to teach my dad what I learn and show him deeper levels of Buddhism that he can utilize to promote spiritual connection in his own life. He has a big interest in Buddhism I know, but the town where we live is limiting on allowing people to branch out and explore other ways of life. As my dad has told me how Buddhists often use meditation, I am curious to learn how Buddhism uses meditation and how it differentiates from the meditation I have done. I have only really gotten into meditating in the last 2 years and know I will grow and benefit from adding a Buddhist context to my style of meditation.

Although I have very little knowledge of Buddhism, I think that could be good as I will be able to absorb so much authentic knowledge about this culture and spirituality here! I am so excited; it is a big reason why I came to Chiang Mai for Study Abroad.

2.2 McNamee, Sam (smcname@siue.edu) May 29, 2024 8:52 PM
From what I know of Buddhism, it was founded in 600 B.C. by Siddhartha Gau-



tama. Siddhartha was a Brahman prince that gave up his wealth to find a way to solve the problems in India at the time. There are three divisions of Buddhism, Theravada, Mahayana, Manuyana. I know that not all that believe in Buddhism are looking to receive enlightenment in their lifetime, only the monks are looking for enlightenment. I know that those that receive enlightenment or are close to it are called Arhats.

Historically some of the biggest contributors to Buddhism is Akso-ka that brought Buddhism to Thailand, and Java Ryman the Seventh who solidified Buddhism as a religion in Thailand. I know that Buddhism works to remove worldly concerns and works to clear the mind through meditation. I know that Buddhism does not give its followers a god to believe in so many supplements Buddhism with other religions, which in Thailand is most often Animism though Hinduism is also very common.

From what I know Buddhism is not a growing religion as it does not actively seek out followers like Christianity. Many followers of Buddhism work to achieve merit throughout their life through donations of food to the monks as well as monetary donations to temples. One important Buddhist holiday that was enacted as a way to achieve some merit and wash away the bad luck throughout the last year is Songkran. One of the people that is closest to enlightenment is the Dali Llama who has experienced a lot of trouble from China so he has had to be protected. When the Dali Llama dies, he is reborn and his followers need to find him as a reborn child.

2.3 Justin Simon (1/18/2024)

Buddhism holds a rich tapestry of interpretations, where its significance varies from person to person. It can be perceived either as a religion, a philosophy, or simply as a way of life. Many individuals find themselves navigating a mixture and conjunction of these three perspectives to encapsulate their personal understanding of what Buddhism truly means to them. At its essence, Buddhism involves a deep respect for Buddha and a deep exploration into profound aspects of existence, particularly emphasizing the nature of life. However,



it goes beyond simple prescribed rituals, allowing for diverse interpretations that include personal philosophies of mindfulness and meditation.

When understanding Buddhism and what it is, something very prominent and important is the Four Noble Truths, serving as a foundational framework for understanding life's difficulties. These truths are of similar nature to ideas that illuminate the nature of existence. Duhkha as the first noble truth shows the inherent challenges and unsatisfactoriness woven into the fabric of life. Samudaya traces the origins of suffering back to human desires, highlighting the profound connection between attachment and uneasiness. Nirodha underscores the liberating power of losing cravings, asserting that freedom from suffering emerges when one lets go of the relentless pursuit of desires. Lastly, Magga outlines the transformative path leading to getting rid of dissatisfaction, providing a complete roadmap for navigating life's challenges.

In Buddhism there is a strong emphasis on compassion, encouraging students of Buddhism to extend kindness and empathy towards all living beings. Buddhism is the study of achieving enlightenment not solely for personal liberation but to aid others on their journey. As you aid others with enlightenment it in turn brings enlightenment back to yourself. Buddhism's primary objective of attaining full enlightenment or Niravana is divided into three major branches: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. The attainment of Niravana is contingent upon a Buddhist follower fully embracing the Four Noble Truths. Theravada Buddhism adheres most closely to the original teachings of the Buddha. Its emphasis lies on the individual's path to enlightenment. Mahayana Buddhism, in contrast, extends an invitation to everyone. It diverges from the focus on personal enlightenment to emphasize contributing to the happiness and wisdom of the entire world. The Mahayana tradition seeks the liberation of all beings, embracing a collective goal beyond individual salvation. Vajrayana Buddhism is a complex tradition marked by intricate rituals, deep symbolism, and practices designed to expedite followers' attainment of enlightenment.



The ultimate aim is to benefit all sentient beings, reflecting a commitment to compassion and swift spiritual progress. In essence, this intricate framework encapsulates the profound wisdom of Buddhism, offering a holistic understanding of existence and providing a transformative pathway toward inner peace. It beckons individuals to embark on a journey of self-discovery, encouraging them to navigate the complexities of life with mindfulness, meditation, and a deep appreciation for temporariness.

Through this lens, Buddhism becomes not just a set of teachings but a transformative philosophy that resonates on a deeply personal level, offering solace and guidance in the intricate tapestry of human experience.

2.4 Lauren Serrano (01/17/24)

To begin, there is not much that I know about Buddhism already but I am very interested and willing to learn. I know that Buddhism is a very popular religion or philosophical tradition practiced in Asia and other places around the world. Buddhism is based on the teaching of the Buddha. Although, Buddhists do not believe in one or multiple gods. Monks are those who devote their lives to practicing their religion. There are many rules they can not break such as no drinking or stealing. Monks live in holy places known as temples and chant many times throughout the day. Monks and other Buddhist believers partake in meditation. There are many different ways one could meditate. There is walking meditation, sitting and even yoga can be a form of meditation. Buddhists also strongly believe in mindfulness and being aware of one's surroundings. Buddhism is based on kindness and peace.

I know that Buddhists believe in rebirth but not reincarnation in the way that Hindus do. I would like to learn more about the differences between Buddhism and Hinduism. I also am aware that Buddhists follow the Four Noble Truths however I am not sure what they are at this point. The goal of Buddhists is to reach Niravana like the Buddha.

Niravana is a state of enlightenment and the highest state of being. There are some basic aspects that I know about Buddhism but I would



really love to know more. There are many concepts that I am unaware of but I am excited to learn about in this class.

2.5 Sydney Windhorst

I must admit that my knowledge of Buddhism both as a whole and specifically in Thailand is very sparse. However, I do know a little.

First, I know Buddhism is a widespread religion most commonly found in the East. I know it has many followers of many ethnicities and is practiced by both men and women. I know it is incredibly old and has been practiced for eons.

Second, I can identify a Buddha and can picture golden statues with its solemn face and crossed legs. I know those sacred statues are based on a real creature that bestowed its wisdom unto humanity but is no longer present. I took a social studies class in 7th grade and remember associating Buddhism with attributes such as peace, moderation and harmony. Buddhists behave conservatively and practice modesty and sobriety. I also remember Buddhism has a deep reverence for life, all life as well as believe in a continuation of life like reincarnation.

I myself am a Christian and as someone who was raised in the church and who loves Jesus with my whole heart, I know how compelling and all-consuming faith can be. I know people who are Buddhist will prioritize it and implement its teachings in every facet of their life, just as I do with my faith. Some of these people are monks and they devote their entire lives to Buddhism. I had a picture in my head of a man with a shiny bald head and a bright orange robe meditating in an ornate temple. Truthfully, I do not know what the temples are used for or what he would meditate on or even why he felt the need to meditate. I know there are many rules in Buddhism and even more so for monks. They live day in and day out under strict guidelines.

There are a lot of unknowns, but religion is single handedly my favorite subject to discuss so I am very eager to learn and to grow in this class.



3. Has been studied in the College

There are finally 7 persons when asked them to express their previous knowledge about Buddhism that they have some knowledges but it's not much about Buddhism : Here are their opinions.

3.1 Julia Creech

Having taken a course solely focused on Buddhism at my home university, I feel as though I have a good understanding on the basics of Buddhism from a western perspective. Outside of that course, I also have personal experience with mindfulness and meditation. The Buddhism course covered Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, the history of Buddhism, the story of the Buddha, Buddhist nationalism, and Buddhist beliefs and principles such as the Noble Eightfold Path, the wheel of rebirth, Niravana, and the Four Noble Truths.

The Buddha, first a man known as Siddhartha Gautama, was born as a prince who walked seconds after leaving the womb and left lotus flowers in the ground behind him. He grew up living a lavish, spoiled life before he ventured outside the castle and saw a sick man, an elderly man, a corpse, and a wandering ascetic. He understood suffering and went to become an ascetic himself. He found a group of other monks, with whom he began to meditate and fast rigorously. He then realized that while lavish living possessions was not the path to take, neither was excessive deprivation. Thus, he established the Middle Way to achieve enlightenment. He sat under a lotus tree for days and reached an enlightened state, 'nirvana.'

I have learned about mindfulness and meditation in a first-hand way through my work with my therapist. Mindfulness is a helpful practice for many people that finds its roots in Buddhism. I have found it to be incredibly helpful for me and my mental health.

Learning about Buddhism from a western perspective in my home university course as well as through a scientific perspective in my personal therapy have both provided with some background knowledge about it, but I am eager and excited to learn about Buddhism in Thailand during this course.



3.2 Sophia Chiari

I first began learning about Buddhism when I started college. I had heard of it before and maybe read a little in high school, but not enough to have a proper understanding. I got an introduction to Buddhism academically in a human spirituality class, then learned more in the Zen Buddhism class that I took last semester at my home university.

From my somewhat basic understanding, Buddhism began in India and follows the teachings of the Buddha. I learned about the story of Siddhartha and know that there are different types of Buddhism. These include Theravada, Mahayana, Tibetan, and Zen. I do not remember which type of Buddhism is most commonly practiced in Thailand, but I have been told that it is conservative compared to other sectors of Buddhism such as how it is practiced in Sri Lanka. I also learned in my Zen class that about 95 percent of the Thai population is Buddhist or follows Buddhism.

There are many key components and concepts in Buddhism. Mindfulness and meditation are both important concepts to this religion. Yoga is another important practice in Buddhism. There are four types of yoga: Karma yoga, Bhakti yoga, Jnana yoga, and Raja yoga. These all have different meanings and significance; however, I do not remember which is which. Some important concepts include Karma, Dharma, the eightfold path, and enlightenment. The Buddha taught these things that he realized during his life's journey and experiences after leaving the life of royalty and wealth he was born into.

Buddhism moved from India all over Asia. During the time of Confucianism, it made its way to China, causing some people to question certain Confucius values. It is now very popular in many Asian countries such as China, Japan, Sri Lanka, and of course Thailand. Buddhism has also traveled to the western world where many people have started to practice.

This is the basic knowledge I have of Buddhism based on prior Buddhism or religious studies classes. There are more concepts I would like to elaborate on such as the differences between Theravada and Mahayana, how-



ever I do not think I have a good enough understanding to explain. The same goes for concepts such as Bodhisattvas and spirit houses. However, I am excited to learn more!

3.2- Abbi

What do I know about Buddhism? Buddhism is a mixture of religion and spiritual practices. There are many different types of Buddhist practices and beliefs that one can choose from. The basis of Buddhism is that your soul has been reborn over multiple lifetimes and if you do good in life and follow the basic principles of budding, you will end this journey of reincarnation and your soul will be at rest. You do this through meditation and practicing self discipline and being calm. I know that there's one type of practice where you live in the woods for I think a year or until you master the principles. There is ren, zen and other types of practice that bring you closer to Buddha also

3.4 Arisa Hocharoen (18 Jan 2024)

Knowledge of Buddhism I feel that the Western world sees Buddhism as a religion known for being 'low-key' and focused solely on meditation and spiritualness; this is seen a lot in places like yoga studios, where Buddha statues are prominent because the West conceptualizes Buddhism as meditative.

From my experiences growing up, I was familiar with Buddhism as my family was Buddhist; however, I didn't really understand much about the religion until I was much older and took a course on social activism and Buddhism. Although the course gave me an overview of some concepts of Buddhism, there are still some concepts I don't understand fully. My current knowledge of Buddhism is primarily the basic concepts of the religion and a bit of the origins of how Buddhism was founded. I know that Buddhism originated in India and that Siddhartha Gautama was the founder of Buddhism and was the first Buddha. The Buddha's rebirths are documented in the jatakas, and there are also the sutras, which I believe are stories about the Buddha. In addition to this, I also know that there are three branches of Buddhism: Mahayana, Theravada, and Vajrayana. Mahayana is practiced more in East Asia, Theravada in Southeast Asia, and Vajrayana



in Tibet. Meditation is also a major part of practicing Buddhism.

Regarding the concepts within the religion, I'm familiar with some of the practices and ideas in the religion. As I have learned, Karma in Buddhism is an important part of the religion. From what I understand, karma is the actions you've performed in your life; those actions affect your rebirth in the next life. Rebirth/reincarnation is also a part of Buddhism I am familiar with; it ties in with karma and determines your next life after death in the current one.

As I've learned, suffering is a key part of Buddhism; with Buddhism, you're trying to escape the cycle of rebirth and suffering to become enlightened. Suffering stems from attachments created in your current life. To go along with the topic of suffering is the Four Noble Truths that discuss suffering. They state that: life is full of suffering, the cause of suffering is attachment, to end suffering you must end suffering, and the way to do so is to follow the Eightfold Path

3.5 Amika Starr (18 Jan 2024)

Reflection I have a general understanding of Buddhist teachings and practices in Thailand through my experiences in other classes and my experiences traveling around Thailand with my Thai family, visiting wats, making merit, and more.

I will summarize my understanding in this reflection. The Buddha had been reborn several times when he appeared in the dreams of Queen Maya. She then became pregnant through immaculate conception and gave birth to a son, Siddhartha Gautama, who would become the Buddha. His father, King Suddhodana, had heard a prophecy that his son would either be a great political ruler or a great religious leader. He wanted Siddhartha to be the ruler of the kingdom, so the King tried to shield his son from worldly problems, like poverty and suffering, by lavishing him with wealth and luxury. The prince grew up in this environment and got married. But one day, he ventured outside the walls of the palace and witnessed the Four Signs or Four Sights; an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a holy man. Siddhartha learned, for the first time, that suffering



and death existed in the world, and it made him realize that his joys and pleasures were only temporary. He decided to leave his life of royalty through the Great Renunciation and chose to become a wandering aesthetic. Along with four other aesthetics, Siddhartha tried to give up on worldly desires, for example, he gave up on hunger and the need to eat by fasting. However, he almost died many times. Then, the Buddha met a musician, who taught him the Middle Path, a method that was between the two extremes of self-indulgence and pointless self-mortification. Under the Bodhi Tree, the Buddha reached enlightenment or Niravana, learning about the six Gati, his past lives/ reincarnations, karma, and more.

He continued to practice his spirituality, while also traveling and teaching new disciples the Middle Way and Eightfold Path, accepting many new followers as novices and monks. In the end, the Buddha reached Parinirvana, which is an end to resurrection and the final enlightenment.

Since then, the Buddha's teachings or Dharma have spread through Asia and the world, with different sects of the religion, like Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism, forming. In Thailand, Buddhism mixed with local traditional beliefs in paganism and animism, so that local deities, like the River Goddess, became part of Buddhist teachings. Most people in Thailand practice Buddhism. They do things like upholding the five main precepts (do not kill, steal, commit adultery, lie, and abstain from sexual indulgence), making merit, visiting wats, becoming monks, and many more actions.

3.6 Maya Posecznick (m.posecznick@gmail.com) May 29, 2024
7:16 AM

As a Korean American, I grew up in the hubs for Korean immigrants in the United States, Protestant churches. My mom found a lot of purpose and connection in the church community, whereas my dad, an agnostic, attended mostly to help me connect with my Korean heritage. My dad's closest tie to religion manifested through pop Buddhism and Taoism, popularized through books like Thich Nhat Hanh's *The Art of Living* and Benjamin Hoff's *The Tao of Pooh*. While he didn't practice Buddhism, this increased my early exposure to



ideas about karma and the life's cycle. In the USA, Buddhism and its associated practices is largely commercialized. The story of the Buddha, a prince renouncing his worldly possession in order to better understand the mystifying and disturbing existence of suffering, seems to be largely lost. The name, Siddhartha Gautama, lost with it. Instead, the way American media and cultural discussion presents Buddhism is as a nonreligious, ascetic philosophy. Meditation finds its way introduced into the common curricula as a way for managing symptoms of overworking and mass inequities rather than a way of life.

The design of pseudo Buddhist applications and programming restrict content to very brief guided meditations usually less focused on the beach and more on a singular grain of sand. It rarely considers spiritual or necessarily radical approaches to compassion, loving, and life itself. In my experience, my interactions with Buddhism have fallen short of my expectation because of their very Western approach. For a month or so, I attended a regular Won Buddhism temple located near myself. However, the members of the temple often talked about Buddhism as something that others should be encouraged to convert to.

There approaches reminded me of other American religious beliefs about the conquest of the soul. The sense of renunciation and inner peace was somewhat lost. While I've found some wisdom in Mahayana Buddhism, I have much to learn and look forward to doing so

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I have previously taken a world religions class. This class covered Buddhism for about three days, so it was pretty brief. My main takeaway was that there are different types of Buddhism. The first is the original Buddhism from India, which is basically about Buddha finding enlightenment. It includes the four stages of meditation and the teachings of the Four Noble Truths (Stress or dissatisfaction (dukkha), greed or excessive desire (Trishna), and extinguishment (Nirvana). The Noble Eightfold Path is (right understanding, resolve, action, and livelihood- three virtues: effort, mindfulness, and concentration - meditation). Characteristics of life (Samsara) include (Impermanence, Stress/dissatisfaction,



and No self). Finally, there is detachment, and Hinayna goes over the three jewels, Three Baskets, and Arhat. The second is Mahayana Buddhism. This type concerns the triple body of Buddha, which is the Earth body, Heavenly body(which we can pray to), and Universal body (we are all Buddha).

The doctrine of emptiness is about the Ontological Sunyata-anthropological anatman, Prehension (third eye), and compassion, and Samsara is Niravana. There are also the Bodhisattvas, which talk about Transferable karma, arrogance vs. laziness, the Buddha's example vs. expedient means, and the six perfections: giving, morals, tolerance, perseverance, meditation, and intuitive knowing. Thirdly is Mahayana Zen. This one is more different than the first two types. Their motto is that by pointing directly to the mind, you can see into your true nature and attain Buddhahood.

We did some readings, especially for this one, to help us understand, and in those, I wrote down some quotes that I will recite to help explain what they are. The first one is “Huike to Bodhidharma; my mind is anxious; please pacify it. Bodhidharma: Bring me your mind, and I will pacify it. Huike: although I’ve sought it, I cannot find it. There, Bodhidharma replied I have pacified your mind.” The second one is Shitou - “This very mind, just this is Buddha.” lastly is “Kill the Buddha,” which means that from what I understand, it means having that separation and stopping looking elsewhere. However, I am still not entirely familiar with this type it kind of confuses me a little.

The Analysis of their Perspectives

So far as the collection of American Students’ perspectives on the previous with in 2 years, it implies that some of the know a few about Buddhism. This is because of hey are live in the American culture since their childhood and never have opportunity to publicly and freely study religion in the schools. In the second group they were personally interested by activities or by reading books. In the last group they studied Buddhism in the Colleges or by their family’s cultures, that why they, no doubt, had more prior knowledge about Buddhism.



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