

Extended Essay

World Religions

**Aspects of the different practice of  
Buddhism in East and West.**

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Abstract

This study investigates whether the difference of converting to Buddhism rather than being born into it influences the way it is exercised in East and West respectively. To obtain this information four Buddhists were interviewed, two of these converts, providing answers to a structured interview, making a direct comparison possible. It has been assumed that the path to Buddhism would impact the way it is performed showing significant and noticeable differences in its exercise. Concentrating on three major aspects, the primary attraction to Buddhism, Buddhism in daily observance and the monastic dimension it was possible to analyse and compare the two different study groups, East and western converts with each other. The hypothesis has been supported by the evidence obtained and has led to show that the conscious choice of Westerners to become Buddhists leads to a more ardent following of Buddhist teachings, while Easterners having been born into a Buddhist society follow a somehow more relaxed attitude that may appear at times almost indifferent yet is characterised by a much deeper Buddhist socialisation.

173 Words

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### Introduction

Although Buddhism was followed by Europeans as early as the time of the explorers and became the subject of studies within the departments of Oriental Studies of various European universities<sup>1</sup>, a wider part of western society<sup>2</sup> has been exposed to and was often fascinated by Buddhism since the 1960's<sup>3</sup>. Fueled by numerous developments such as the interest in alternative faiths, the Vietnam War against a predominantly Buddhist country as well as the onset of mass tourism<sup>4</sup> of western travelers to South East Asia, Buddhism found its way into western society. Today it is after Islam the fastest growing religion<sup>5</sup> in the Christian societies of the West<sup>6</sup>. With significant and growing numbers of Buddhist followers, in the West through western converts and eastern<sup>7</sup> immigrants, it is interesting to explore whether there are distinct differences in the exercise and practice of Buddhism between East and West. Distinctly different traditions in most parameters which shape our respective socializations (such as history, social progress, education, faiths, etc), being born into Buddhism<sup>8</sup> in the East or having converted to Buddhism in the West, may also point towards differences in how people practice Buddhism. My own interest in the subject stems from having travelled on a number of occasions to Buddhist countries and from being in contact with several western converts to Buddhism. My own knowledge has been derived and absorbed by frequent exposure to this culture<sup>9</sup>. On the surface it was easy for me to note that there are differences in the practice of Buddhism between western converts and eastern practitioners. What these differences are and whether they are caused

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.orinst.ox.ac.uk/html/isa/buddhist\\_studies/buddhist\\_studies.html](http://www.orinst.ox.ac.uk/html/isa/buddhist_studies/buddhist_studies.html) Access date: 03.10.2009

<sup>2</sup> The term "western" is used to refer to the nations and societies of western Europe and North America

<sup>3</sup> [http://lists.village.virginia.edu/lists\\_archive/sixties-/3368.html](http://lists.village.virginia.edu/lists_archive/sixties-/3368.html) Access date: 03.10.2009

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.tourismfuturesintl.com/analyst/index.html> Access date: 03.10.2009

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=3,1952,0,0,1,0> Access date: 03.10.2009

<sup>6</sup> Via conversion

<sup>7</sup> The terminology "eastern" is used to refer to the nations and societies of South East Asia with predominantly Buddhist societies.

<sup>8</sup> The Buddhism being focused on is Theravada Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism is the oldest Buddhist school existing and literally translated means "*the Teaching of the Elders*"

<sup>9</sup> Visits: 2003 Thailand, Laos; 2004 Vietnam, Thailand; 2005 Borneo, Sarawak; 2006 Laos, Thailand; 2007 Malaysia, Thailand; 2009 South Korea

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by the different paths to Buddhism (be it western conversion or eastern tradition) I will explore in this essay.

To begin with, the most prominent difference in practicing the Buddhist faith between the East and the West seems to be that eastern individuals have been born into Buddhism just like Westerners have been born into a Christian society, western converts however have made a conscious choice to embrace Buddhism. Therefore it sometimes appears that Easterners display an occasional indifferent attitude towards their faith in contrast to the more devout converts. The thesis being that it is the different path of East and West to Buddhism that is responsible for the apparent differences in its exercise. In order to support or reject my thesis I shall interview Buddhist converts as well as Buddhists who have been born into Buddhism. All have received and answered a structured questionnaire<sup>10</sup>, the responses to which have then been analysed and compared. Although the study group is somewhat limited in size it is quite varied in its set up. The two converts to Buddhism are both European, yet have chosen to pursue their faith in quite different ways. One is a German businessman who spends his time between Europe and the US, having brought up his children in the Buddhist faith. The other is a successful Englishman who left his highly paid job and his family to live a more meaningful life in Thailand. He ordained and served as a monk for ten years but disrobed recently in order to run a well known charity that supports children from poor rural backgrounds to get school and university education, resulting in the whole rural community benefitting from their educated sons and daughters.

Those respondents who have been born into Buddhism consist of a Buddhist nun who lives in a monastery<sup>11</sup> near Seoul in South Korea. She finds her fulfillment in life teaching the virtues of Buddhism to people coming from every corner of the world to find inspiration and spirituality in this particular monastery. Information and comments to the questionnaire have also been received from a Thai student of the SET<sup>12</sup> foundation. A young man who grew

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<sup>10</sup> See Appendix p. 15

<sup>11</sup> Myogak Temple on Mt. Naksan, Seoul

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.thaistudentcharity.org/> Access date: 04.10.2009

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up in an orphanage and has been receiving an educational grant for years and now studies engineering at a technical university.

Furthermore I shall research secondary sources in appropriate publications and assess the information contained with the outcome of my questionnaires.

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### Main Body

#### Aspect 1 – Attraction to Buddhism

As opposed to Easterners, who are born into the Buddhist faith and tradition with all its rituals and social structure, Westerners are often attracted to Buddhism through a variety of often very personal experiences and circumstances. The result of my questionnaires points to a kind of disillusionment with western lifestyle, in particular its materialism and value system. Social status is usually associated with people in positions of power, socio-economic success, monetary wealth but also at times physical beauty. The social recognition these elements often receive, are usually regarded by western converts to Buddhism as superficial and shallow. They do not provide the “happiness” in a sense of fulfillment that those people desire and strive for in their lives. In one particular case the accumulation of wealth in itself seemed to be the trigger for a search for spirituality<sup>13</sup> that replaced materialism with something that benefitted a greater good. In other cases a dramatic experience, in one case the death of a family member<sup>14</sup> prompted a person to convert to Buddhism as this triggered an introspection and reflection upon the meaning of life. Buddhism seems to have a particular attraction to Westerners in as much that it supersedes the merely religious but providing also a framework of answers to some elementary human questions<sup>15</sup> much like any religion or philosophy may do.

Easterners have usually not actively chosen to become Buddhist, they simply have been born and raised in a Buddhist society. While there are certainly a fair percentage of devout and learned Buddhists, the overall majority most certainly will have a relationship with their faith comparable to that of Westerners with Christianity.

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix p.16 Question 2

<sup>14</sup> See Appendix p.16 Question 2

<sup>15</sup> See Appendix p.16 Question 2

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Their religion has not developed as the answer to a soul searching quest. It could be claimed that their attraction to Buddhism is therefore one of national or regional identity. Like in many other nations, they feel an attachment and pride in their history and traditions, both are significantly shaped through religion. A further point which should not be underestimated is the opportunities that monastic schools and temples provide for the education of Easterners. It would therefore not be wrong to state that for some the embracing of Buddhism is pursued as a matter of social advancement. Also the social recognition of Buddhist monks in the East serves as an attraction for families to send their young sons to monastery schools and institutions. A tradition has emerged where it is viewed favorably for at least one son of a Buddhist family to enter into a monastery for a period of his life. There is evidence<sup>16</sup> that suggests the underlying reasons for this is also an economic one, as this results in one mouth less to feed, yet at the same time families show an enormous willingness to give generously to begging monks.

In contrast there is no evidence that social advancement and economic advantage is associated with Westerners converting to Buddhism or even being ordained as a monk.

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<sup>16</sup> Pannapadipo, Peter Phra. Little Angels, Life as a Novice Monk in Thailand p. 1, 2

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## Aspect 2 – Buddhism in Daily Observance

With Buddhism being one of the most prominent religions in the East, it is to be expected that followers' daily routines are heavily influenced by Buddhism. These routines and rituals may not be a conscious act, though the roots of them likely lie in religion. In the following text I shall try to list examples of "daily acts of Buddhism" and contrast them to the "daily Buddhism" of converts in the West. For example the greeting in Thailand, the so-called "*Wai*"<sup>17</sup> is the traditional greeting that is performed at different heights, depending upon the status of the "*greeter*" and the person "*being greeted*". Only monks are greeted with the highest *Wai*. This makes the social status of Buddhist monks visible for all. In the East, monks are an essential part of society. They are honoured and shown vast amounts of respect. It is looked upon favourably in the East to send one son to a monastery for a period of time to mark their transition from puberty to adulthood. This monastic period usually amounts to three months. In the monastery the son is taught and encouraged to pray for a happy and fulfilling life for himself and for his relatives.

A further example of Buddhism's interconnectedness with society is the so called "*almsgiving*"<sup>18</sup> ritual. At dawn, monks walk the streets barefoot from the temple to the village to receive food offered to them by the villagers. It is believed that lay people giving to the monks in this way can "*make merit*"<sup>19</sup>. Every member of the village will only give a small amount of food into the alms bowl of the monk, so as to enable others to give to "*make merit*". Another example, there is not a specific day for Buddhists to visit the temple as there is a day to go to church in the West (i.e. Sunday). On a round number birthday it is tradition to visit the temple and present the monks with practical gifts such as toothpaste or a small amount of money. Lay people do not visit the temple that often, but do so when they need guidance or spiritual help. In the temple they light an incense stick and offer lotus flowers to the Buddha.

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.thaiwaysmagazine.com/thai\\_article/2110\\_wai/wai.html](http://www.thaiwaysmagazine.com/thai_article/2110_wai/wai.html) Access date: 03.10.2009

<sup>18</sup> Pannapadipo, Peter Phra. *Phra Farang: An English Monk in Thailand*. p.68,69

<sup>19</sup> See Appendix p. 15 Question 1

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Superstition deriving from the early South East Asian religions of animism<sup>20</sup> entwined with Buddhism has spread its roots deep into easterner's everyday life. One example are "*Spirit Houses*". These can be found everywhere, but most importantly in the garden of every home. The intention of the spirit house is to provide a comfortable home for the spirits to live in. It is believed that the spirits that dwell in the house can be good or bad, they can be helpful or cause trouble and interfere but most importantly the spirits have to be respected by the families. The families must look after the spirit houses and keep the houses in good order so the spirits do not vacate their house and move in with them.

In most cultures religious aspects are associated with certain passages of life. One of the most prominent passages of life is its end, death. In a case of a person's death in the East, cotton strings are strung over the house and adjacent trees, to make sure that bad spirits do not reach the soul of the deceased person. If the spirit should try to approach the soul it would entangle itself in the cotton strings and is as such prevented from doing so. Buddhists cremate the bodies of their deceased family members, since it is seen that the deceased person will not be needing it any more. If the person has earned enough merit during his or her lifetime they shall be reborn. In the traditional eastern funeral ceremonies one celebrates the deceased person's life as opposed to lamenting the loss and going into mourning. During the funeral the coffin will remain in the family home in the middle of the room. The monks sit elevated to the coffin and recite sutras<sup>21</sup>. Afterwards they will be served with food by the male members of the family.

Western Buddhists living in the West are limited in experiencing a Buddhist lifestyle in comparison to Easterners in their respective countries. There are few Buddhist temples, rituals or even traditions in the West. Converts have to seek out and create a Buddhist lifestyle for themselves. This conscious choice may be seen as a necessity for western Buddhists living in societies which some describe as following an almost atheist lifestyle. Western converts may have to ignore many of their national traditions, and create new personal ones reinforcing their beliefs and

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<sup>20</sup> Practice of Paganism believing in Spirits

<sup>21</sup> "a Buddhist scripture" *Freeing the Heart: Dhamma teachings from the Nuns' Community at Amaravati & Cittaviveka Buddhist Monasteries*, p. 240 © Amaravati Publications, 2001/2544, Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, Great Gaddesden, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire, HP1 3BZ, England

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allowing them to live a pure and fulfilling Buddhist lifestyle. Belonging to a minority, converts to Buddhism may experience ostracism, exclusion, prejudice or even discrimination. Converting despite all these potentially difficult consequences usually always requires significant conviction. In the East being a Buddhist is usually much easier given the fact that as members of the majority religious group, individuals are not experiencing exposure. Social acceptance is therefore not an issue. Quite the opposite is the case since the overall religious majority Buddhism exerts pressure on people to become or remain Buddhists in order to conform with and experience acceptance of society.

Whether it is the honour which is displayed towards Buddhist monks or the frequency of the interaction between the representatives of the Buddhist faith and the wider public, the difference between the practice of Buddhism between East and West are distinct. Similar differences exist in respect to the frequency and motivations for temple visits and the role of the representatives of Buddhism on important events, as was just exemplified on the example of the death of a person.

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## Aspect 3 – Monastic Dimension

As opposed to western monasteries, eastern ones date back far longer<sup>22</sup>. They are an important factor in Buddhist communities. Apart from their spiritual significance they also play a major social and educational role. Monastic schools and temples teach the “*Buddhist Path*” but also other important skills such as reading and writing. The monastic community called the “*Sangha*”<sup>23</sup> is the living example of how to live a correct and ethical life. Monasteries therefore function both as an inspiration as well as an example for the laypeople of Buddhism. Monks duties do not solely consist of reaching a higher level of spirituality but also of assisting the lay community by guiding them in times of difficulty as well as teaching them in different areas of knowledge. Monasteries themselves are more of an aggregate that offers laypeople a place to worship and participation in religious ceremonies. Many temple complexes have integrated spaces for schooling and facilities for the children of the community. Monks play an important part in everyday occurrences such as birth and death. In eastern tradition monks visit the homes of dying people to recite sutras<sup>24</sup>.

In Buddhism, the monasteries also represent a stepping stone in the life of young men<sup>25</sup>. Here they temporarily serve as a novice monk. The young man’s stay in a monastery can last from a few days up to several weeks. After this time he is spiritually considered an adult by the community. The presence of monastic life is an integral part of Buddhist tradition. It represents the spiritual elevation all Buddhists are aiming to achieve. In contrast to the West, the dependency on its religious community is immense. Monks rely heavily on laypeople in supporting them on their quest to enlightenment or Nirwana<sup>26</sup>. Laypeople must provide the monastery with money and food. In return the monastery is open to anybody who seeks spiritual guidance or assistance. It is therefore not wrong to state that monasteries and

<sup>22</sup> <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/524> Access date: 04.10.2009

<sup>23</sup> “the community of those who practice the Buddha’s way. Often more specifically, those who have formally committed themselves to the lifestyle of a mendicant monk” *Freeing the Heart, Book of Free Distribution of the Amaravati and Cittaviveka Buddhist Monasteries* p. 240. © Amaravati Publications, 2001/2544, Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, Great Gaddesden, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire, HP1 3BZ, England

<sup>24</sup> See page 12 footnote 21

<sup>25</sup> In some countries for example South Korea also women are ordained.

<sup>26</sup> “*Freedom from attachments. The basis for the Enlightened vision*” *Freeing the Heart, Book of Free Distribution of the Cittaviveka Buddhist Monasteries* p. 240.

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communities in the East have an interdependent relationship. A strong relationship between monasteries and society is not unknown to the Christian world. European medieval society had a much more intertwined connection to its monastic structures. Not only were monasteries huge landowners and often also financial powerhouses, but they were also the principal source for getting education. Monks and in particular abbots had an elevated social standing and were a much more integral part of society than nowadays where the monastic presence has largely lost its social importance<sup>27</sup>.

While the significance of Christian monasteries has really diminished in the West, Buddhist temples have predictably an even lower significance. Buddhist temples there cater to a religious minority. They are significant for their followers but do not function on a larger scale let alone influence education and community life as in the East. On an individual level however the significance of the temple may be comparable or even higher than that in the East, its social status as a whole is rather insignificant. The main role of western temples is therefore to provide a "*Retreat*"<sup>28</sup>, to spend periods of time devoted to the practice of meditation and teaching. These retreats can vary in time usually lasting between a week but sometimes up to time spans of four years. Monasteries also usually offer courses concerning Buddhist values such as living in harmony with nature, calmness and often meditational courses and exercises. These temple complexes<sup>29</sup> though do not play a role in everyday life. One could state that western monasteries are visited when the demand therefore arises. They do however not play even remotely comparable roles in everyday life as they do in the East.

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.gabrieleweis.de/3-geschichtsbits/histo-surfing/3-mittelalter/2/3-2-klosterkultur/3-2-klosterkultur.htm> ; <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kloster> Access date both : 04.10.2009

<sup>28</sup> Temporarily removal from ones usual environment in order to reflect and meditate

<sup>29</sup> e.g The Buddhapadipa Temple, London, England <http://www.buddhapadipa.org/> Access date: 04.10.2009 ; Wat Charoenbhavana Manchester, Dhammakaya International Society of United Kingdom (Manchester) Gardner House, Cheltenham Street, Salford, Manchester

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### Conclusion

Looking at the broader picture the data points towards a general trend of a linkage between the origin of the individual practitioners and their form of practise.

Throughout this project, it appears that both groups relate differently to Buddhism and practice it in different ways and for different reasons. The impression gained is that the different path to Buddhism is the reason for its differing ways of practising.

The observations seem to show that Westerners having converted to Buddhism show more enthusiasm for the religion itself in its pure state. The fact that Westerners have most likely not been born into Buddhism proves devotion and commitment. They have made a conscious choice to embrace Buddhism so as to satisfy their spiritual needs. It is purely a quest for spirituality and shows no signs of economic advantages or community pressure such as may be found in the East. Buddhist rituals are also not an integrated part of western society and therefore cannot be assigned to habit or custom. Also the Buddhist monastic dimension is rather limited, much like the Christian monasteries influence is limited in our society, too.

Looking at the East however there are many more attractions to Buddhism than just the spiritual soul searching quest. Easterners may identify with their religion only by national identity. Furthermore religion plays an important role in the education of Easterners. Therefore Easterners may turn to religion only in order to gain an education, not out of faith. Social recognition is also an important factor for individuals regardless of their faith. Through peer pressure and driven by a sense of community Easterners may be driven towards Buddhism more than just for religious reasons. Not to be underestimated is the economic aspect. Poor families may be more willing to send their sons to the monastery, if this results in one child less to finance.

The evidence resulting from the questionnaires support the original thesis. The study may have however benefitted from a further differentiation between social class, age and level of education. Had this been done one could have subdivided and accumulated greater insight into the catalysts for religious conversion. Also, the

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number of interview samples could have been larger. A larger sample population<sup>30</sup> would have added breadth as well as depth to the study, basing it on a quantitatively more solid footing. It would have added additional point of views and stronger correlations in central themes, making the findings more authoritative.

As a whole I have found this study rewarding and interesting. I have grown more aware of peoples' need for spirituality and their drive to find a religion which provide answers to their questions. The often very personal information given to me by my interviewees gave me a rather unique insight into their spiritual motivations and allowed me to observe neutrally without feeling personally detached. It also allowed me to increase the understanding of the cultures of many of the countries I have visited. The study facilitated a deeper insight into the interdependency between different paths to Buddhism and its exercise and provided support to the initial assumption.

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<sup>30</sup> A number of people contacted did not return the questionnaire

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## Appendix

### I. Interview

Project: Extended Essay

Interviewer: Esther Walker-Hessenberger

Date of Interview: 27/05/2009

Interview Location: via e-mail

1 *Being a Buddhist who has lived in both the West as well as Thailand, have you experienced any significant differences?*

I haven't personally experienced any significant difficulties because I was a practising Buddhist in the UK for only a short time, before relocating to Thailand to ordain.

To me, the most significant difference between being a practicing Buddhist in the West and in Thailand is that western Buddhists have generally come to the religion/philosophy through their own realization (as in my own case). They are therefore more genuinely committed to following the teaching of the Buddha. Similarly, 'born again' or new Christians are likely to be more committed to the teaching of Christ, compared to those who have simply been brought up with that traditional religious background. In Thailand, most people are brought up as Buddhists but may have neither genuine commitment nor deep understanding of the teaching and they therefore practice at the most superficial level. For the majority of Thais, Buddhism is primarily concerned with 'making merit' with the monks in the hope of achieving a better rebirth. There is little understanding of the higher, more

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complex and more disciplined aspects of the teaching, particularly meditation practice. If Thais practice meditation at all, they usually practice a simple relaxation-type of sitting meditation, rather than Vipassana meditation as realized and taught by the Buddha.

Over the centuries, Thai Buddhism has absorbed aspects of other religions, particularly Animism and Hinduism, and the religion has become something of a hybrid. Now, its traditions, ceremonies and customs are sometimes nothing to do with Buddhism at all. In the West, new Buddhists or students of Buddhism are more easily able to follow the teaching in its original form, stripped of other religious influences. Westerners are also more interested in the higher teaching and practice meditation more earnestly.

2 *Was there a catalyst why you chose to practice Buddhism?*

My personal catalyst was a sudden realization, at 40 years old, that my life-long quest for happiness and satisfaction through the usual methods of acquiring wealth, possessions and experiences were leading nowhere, and certainly not to 'happiness' at anything but the most superficial level. My brother, two years older than me, had acquired enormous wealth and apparent success, and his sudden death at 42 caused me to examine my own lifestyle very closely and brought me to the understanding that my life was basically unsatisfactory, despite the material comforts I filled it with. By chance, at that time I made my first visit to Thailand and had my first contact with the teaching of the Buddha. That teaching immediately made enormous sense and seemed absolutely right for me, so I decided to follow it and have done so ever since.

3 *Why did you choose to permanently practice Buddhism in Thailand?*

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The question perhaps places too much significance on living in Thailand and practicing Buddhism. In my case, the two are only superficially connected. I live in Thailand for my own convenience and because I like the country and its people, and dislike the way European culture is developing (particularly in the UK). I would live in Thailand regardless of what religious philosophy I or the majority of Thai people followed. It so happens that I am also a Buddhist but it is neither easier nor more difficult to be a Buddhist in Thailand than anywhere else. I do not feel the need to attend the many ceremonies at Thai monasteries and I get on with my practice of Buddhism in my own, quiet way.

My original reason for moving from the UK to Thailand was that at the time I decided to become a monk, it was not possible to ordain in the UK. Of all the SE Asian countries following Theravada Buddhism, Thailand was the easiest in which to ordain. Additionally my first – and only – contact with Buddhism at that time had been through the Theravada School (Teaching of the Elders), which is followed in Thailand. Because I ordained in Thailand, I was expected to spend the first five years of my monkhood close to my Upachaya (the senior monk who ordained me). Since then, Thailand has become simply the place I live.

4 *In your opinion how is Buddhism practiced and perceived in the West?*

Apart from my pre-monk training period at the Thai monastery in London, I have never lived or practised as a Buddhist layman or as a monk in the West.

I believe Theravada Buddhism is less popular in the West than the later Mahayana (Great Vehicle) School, which includes Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. Compared to Mahayana, Theravada can seem dry and somewhat lifeless but also (in my opinion) requires considerably more personal discipline, particularly because of its emphasis on Vipassana meditation practice. Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, with their dynamism and colorful traditions, seem to appeal more to Westerners.

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Based on my own experience, western non-Buddhists are generally ignorant of the teaching of the Buddha, even at the simplest level, and tend to regard Buddhists as 'New Age' and rather strange (as bearded, tree-hugging vegetarians for example). This is far from the truth and even a brief explanation of the core teachings will often convince non-Buddhists that the teaching is a straight-forward and practical moral and ethical path to follow through life. The problem is partly that Buddhism is often perceived by non-Buddhists as an alternative 'religion', instead of the simple philosophy and code of ethics that it actually is. This is not helped by the fact that over the years Buddhism has acquired all the usual trappings and superficialities of a religion, even though it really does not require them, and that the emphasis on these has partly overshadowed the core teachings.

In the West and in Europe particularly there are now many Theravada monasteries run by western monks (often ordained and trained in Thailand) who teach Buddhism in its original and pure form. These monasteries always place greater emphasis on meditation practice and less on ceremony and outward form. There are also many monasteries in Europe run by Thai monks who teach Buddhism in its Thai form, mainly for the benefit of local Thai communities.

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## II. Interview

Project: Extended Essay

Interviewer: Esther Walker-Hessenberger

Date of Interview: 14/06/2009

Interview Location: via e-mail

### *1. Being a Buddhist who has converted in the West as have you experienced any significant differences to individuals born into Buddhism?*

First of all I have to admit that the form of Buddhism I follow is not mainstream at all, and has little to do with what in this case and to make a clear distinction, could be called “religious” Buddhism as a system of beliefs.

I practice a form of spiritual training coming from the very earliest Buddhist doctrine, quite close in essence to the spiritual practices of Zen. Therefore I haven’t undergone a “conversion” so to speak, but have had to adopt precise methods to train my mind in order to achieve concrete results.

An individual born into this form of practice would probably have the advantage of training his mind from earlier on but as is the case with all types of practice whether mental or physical, this advantage exists only if the individual truly practices voluntarily and on regular basis.

Coming from the ‘West’, I personally haven’t been able to see any significant

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differences to individuals born into Buddhism who would have come to follow the same practice.

*2. Was there a catalyst why you chose to practice Buddhism?*

At some point in my life I was intuitively looking for possibilities to reach a higher state of self-awareness or mental self-mastery. Books describing techniques helped me getting started with this training. After a few sessions concrete results kept me going.

*3. In your opinion how is Buddhism practiced and perceived in the West?*

It is difficult for me to answer this question as I have little or no contact with followers of the mainstream Buddhist system of beliefs in the 'West'.

My experience is that practitioners of the 'West' perceive the training I follow with the same practical approach, as probably could any serious practitioner in the 'East'.

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### III. Interview with Thai Student

Project: Extended Essay

Interviewer: Esther Walker-Hessenberger

Date of Interview: 6/08/2009

Interview Location: via e-mail

1. *Being a Buddhist who has been born into Buddhism did you experience any significant differences to individuals having converted to Buddhism?*

Not many difference, I come from small village in the North of Thailand where everybody is Buddhist, some are more religious than others but there is nobody who I know has converted. The first person who has make converted was Mr. Peter. He knew more about Buddhism than I did. He was so intelligent and such a nice man! He takes Buddhism very seriously I think he also meditated much more times than me did and other pupils. Where I am now at college, there are a few students who I think are not Buddhists, but I don't know anybody if anybody is Buddhist who has not been born like Buddhist.

2. *What role does Buddhism play in your life and how do you practice Buddhism?*

I don't practice that much but I do go to temple when i have to make the important decision, but also I go when I am worried about my mother and brothers and sisters. My father died long time ago and my mother could not

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pay for us all. So she did not know what else and give me to an orphanage. Now I get a scholarship money to study and I hope that soon i get the good job so I can help them. I do like to celebrate the holy days because then I don't go to the study and there is always very nice food at the temple from village ladys. I don't really believe in spirits either like many of the people here do. In my room though I have a little house for spirits it just looks very pretty.

*3. In your opinion how is Buddhism practiced and perceived in the East?*

I think its just normal because everyone just does the same things. We try to be nice to each other and respect our old people they are so wise! We also try to have a calm mind and not really get an angry mind. We all like the temples, some go very often but i go because I think they really pretty and the monks are all so kind. I have also seen though young novices who do not behave well, too! Sometimes they always play with their mobile phones, this is not the proper way. I think everybody does the same, just some do it more. But everybody goes on special days, like birthdays, then we give the monks little things.

Esther Rose Walker-Hessenberger, Candidate Number: 00622065, Extended Essay, May 2010

#### IV. Interview with Buddhist Nun

Project: Extended Essay

Interviewer: Esther Walker-Hessenberger

Date of Interview: 19/08/2009

Interview Location: via e-mail

1. *Being a Buddhist who has been born into Buddhism did you experience any significant differences to individuals having converted to Buddhism?*

In the temple where i teaching the Buddhism, there is many foreign people who come and stay. Some are Buddhist and some are not Buddhists. Many come from America and Europe not so many Japanese. Some foreign people know a lot about Buddhism and are very holy because Buddha is in everybody. Some too serious and need more light mind, Buddhism is also fun! Not just prostration of prayer ! People from Seoul want relax from busy busy time, but many Americans want listen to Sutra and drink Dado Tee.

2. *What role does Buddhism play in your life and how do you practice Buddhism?*

For me is putting down the ponderous thoughts and to enter happiness. Not to have greedy mind or jealous mind. Buddhism is all my life as I teach to many people. My home is the monastery. I want to give happiness to people and compassionate mind. I am always in the temple with our Zen master who I can ask questions and he leads me to happiness too. I am vegetarian and go to morning ceremony everyday so i

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also get up from the sleeping at 3 am. On the important days i help the Zen master and the students too. I am very happy person to be Nun and always laugh!

*3. In your opinion how is Buddhism practiced and perceived in the East?*

In Korea not everybody is Buddhist many also the Christians. Many like Buddhist and come to temple is very normal here! Buddhists are nice with everybody and everyone is nice with Buddhist too. In countries like Thailand very significance here not so much but everybody likes and normal. Very long History in Korea, Korean people like Compassionate mind.