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# **NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY**

## **SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**



### **The Pursuit of Enlightenment and the Singaporean Buddhist Monastics**

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**A Final Year Project submitted to the School of Humanities and Social Sciences,  
Nanyang Technological University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Sociology**

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## Abstract

The primary goal of this paper is to understand why some Singaporeans decide to follow the Buddhist monastic way of life. Situating the research in the context of the modern, capitalist, multicultural Singapore society, I have used Berger and Luckmann's (1966) sociology of knowledge to explore and explain the process of becoming Buddhist monastics of some Singaporeans. Through field work at various Buddhist sites in Singapore and in-depth interviews with Singaporean Buddhist monastics who are residing locally and overseas, the findings reveal that the process of becoming a Buddhist monastic involves the socialization of individuals into the Buddhist reality, the de-reification of other realities, and lastly, the re-socialization into the Buddhist monastic reality. These findings are later linked to broader changes and persistence in Buddhism in Singapore, which have been characterized by some authors as a trend towards Reformist Buddhism.

Keywords: Enlightenment, Buddhist monastic, Singapore, socialization, de-reification, re-socialization

Word Count: 140

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.....  
*May all beings be happy and safe...*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

This research project started with a simple question: Why do some people decide to become Buddhist monastics,<sup>1</sup> foregoing the pleasures of worldly life and leading a seemingly ascetic lifestyle? As a sociology student who is also a Buddhist, I have been very interested in the lives of Buddhist monks and nuns. While the media has written much about international Buddhist figures like the Dalai Lama, Aung San Suu Kyi, especially when it comes to political issues, little is known about the lives of ordinary Buddhist monastics.

In the context of Singapore, Buddhist monks and nuns are not visible in the public sphere. In the religious sphere, despite the numerous Buddhist temples and organizations, visits to these places show that the majority of the resident monastics are from countries outside of Singapore. The questions that I have are: What does it take and is it appealing to become a Buddhist monastic in Singapore? What are the factors that impel some Singaporeans to choose the Buddhist monastic way of life, and what inhibit others from doing so? Do people decide to become Buddhist monastics purely to pursue Enlightenment? If that is the case, what does Enlightenment mean in a consumerist-capitalist society like Singapore, and in their pursuit of Enlightenment, what are the social roles that Buddhist monastics have to take on? How do these roles reflect the spiritual needs of the wider Buddhist communities and Singapore society at large at the present time?

Even though the majority of Chinese Singaporeans are “Buddhists,”<sup>2</sup> sociological literature on the topic of Buddhism in Singapore is rather scarce, compared to that of Christianity or Chinese folk religions. Specific studies about Singaporean Buddhist monastics are also limited. In an attempt to bridge the existing research gap, this paper aims to explore the lives of Singaporeans who have gone forth to become Buddhist monastics, and to understand why, as Singaporeans who grew up in the modern capitalist-consumerist Singapore society, they decide to follow the Buddhist monastic way of life. The paper begins with a literature review on the topic of Buddhism and Buddhist monastics in general, followed by a focus on Buddhism in Singapore in particular. Key concepts from Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) sociology of knowledge such as primary socialization, secondary socialization and re-

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<sup>1</sup> From now on, I will use Buddhist *monastics* as a general term for both Buddhist monks (*bhikkhus*) and nuns (*bhikkhunis*). They are often referred to as world-renouncers because like the Buddha, they renounced worldly attachments to pursue higher spiritual goals. *Bhikkhu/bhikkhuni* are the Pali versions while *bhikshu/bhikshuni* are the Sanskrit versions for monks/nuns.

<sup>2</sup> Even though the percentage of “Buddhists” does fluctuate over the years, Chinese Singaporeans who identify themselves as Buddhists often make up the majority: 34.3% in 1980 (second to Taoism, 38.2%), 39.4% in 1990, 53.6% in 2000 and 43.0% in 2010 (Singapore Census Advance Release, 2000 and 2010)

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socialization are then presented as a theoretical framework for data analysis. Details of how the study was conducted will be documented in the methods and procedures section. Based on the data collected from field work and interviews, the previously-presented theoretical concepts are applied to explain how the respondents gradually increased their commitments to Buddhism to the point of becoming Buddhist monastics. The findings are linked to the broader theme of religious change and persistence within Buddhism in Singapore and the world.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### II.1. BUDDHISM AND THE BUDDHIST MONASTICS

Buddhism as a religion was founded by the Buddha.<sup>3</sup> He was born Siddharta Gautama, son of the rajah of Kapilavastu, a small kingdom in North-west India. Although growing up with all the luxuries of a prince's life, he was not satisfied and was driven by an internal compulsion to seek for a higher truth of his own existence. Inspired by the figure of an ascetic renouncer, at the age of twenty-nine he left his family to go forth and immersed himself in various spiritual practices in search of spiritual Enlightenment. After experiencing different extreme-ascetic practices with different teachers, he started to look for the answer on his own, and attained Enlightenment<sup>4</sup> at the age of forty (Cantwell and Kawanami 2002; Metz 2007). After his Enlightenment, the Buddha was reluctant, but later was convinced by a god to pass on his teaching (the Dhamma<sup>5</sup>), set the Dhamma wheel in motion (Metz 2007:224-5) and started to share his discovery with other spiritual seekers. His basic teachings, the Four Noble Truths, point out the unsatisfactory nature of existence which causes suffering, and the way to end suffering, taught as the Noble Eight-fold Path (Cantwell and Kawanami 2002). The most prominent character of the Buddha's life story is the spiritual search to find the ultimate answer to humankind's existential suffering.<sup>6</sup> This is an important point to start with before we turn our attention to his disciples, the Buddhist monastics.

Theoretically, Buddhist monastics are those who have left their homes to learn and practice the Buddha's teachings in the pursuit of Enlightenment in the conducive environment of the monastery. The monastics differ from lay Buddhists in several key features. As ascetic renouncers, they are not concerned about worldly issues, such as family and making a living, in order to focus on spiritual practice. Being celibate, they follow the Buddha's teachings by living ethically according to the monastic code of conduct (*Vinaya*).<sup>7</sup> Lastly, while the pursuit of Enlightenment is the key characteristic of the monastic vocation, lay people tend to be less concerned about it. Living on alms from the laity, the monastics serve the latter's religious

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<sup>3</sup> meaning one who is awakened

<sup>4</sup> It can generally be understood as being freed/ liberated from suffering. The Pali word is *Nibbana* and the Sanskrit word is *Nirvana*.

<sup>5</sup> This is the Pali version, while the Sanskrit version is Dharma, as the Truth or the Buddha teachings.

<sup>6</sup> According to Weber, there are two main kinds of suffering with which religion is concerned: *contingent* suffering (more of a physical suffering, like disease, disasters, etc.) and *existential* suffering (which means there is inherently flaw in human existence).

<sup>7</sup> There are 227 precepts for monks, compared to the main five precepts for lay Buddhists.



needs by sharing the Dhamma, hence an interdependent relationship develops between the monastics and the laity (Cantwell and Kawanami 2002).

In contrast to the simplistic description above, several studies have shown that Enlightenment may be a far-fetched goal even for the monastics. The reasons for some to go forth can be more mundane, such as to gain higher social status, obtain an education, get out of poverty or life miseries, or earn merits for parents (Swearer 2010). Sometimes the monastery becomes a secure home for people in times of crisis (Baochang and Tsai 1994). Moreover, the monastery, ideally a conducive place for spiritual practice, is also an entity in the society. It needs not only material support but also political license to function (Stark 2001). Historically, the monastics have taken on various social, political<sup>8</sup> and cultural<sup>9</sup> roles besides pursuing spiritual perfection and sharing the Dhamma. It is important to bear in mind that no matter how much they engage in this-worldly activities, their very source of charisma and legitimacy is other-worldliness, i.e. the monastic vocation is to serve religious ends. If monks are perceived to be too involved in this-worldly matters, be they political or material, which may threaten the laity's interests, their religious legitimacy will be challenged (Swearer 2010). Therefore, the boundary between Buddhist monastics and the laity is not clear-cut and instead, constantly negotiated. Some authors have suggested that such boundary is blurring<sup>10</sup> in modern societies, as many modern Buddhists believe that Enlightenment is not an exclusive pursuit of monastics and active social engagement in society is not limited to only lay people (Schedneck 2007; Swearer 2010). These are important features to bear in mind when we consider the context of Singapore.

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<sup>8</sup> The monastic sangha is a source of legitimacy for kingship and the state in Theravada countries. In Tibet, the monastic sangha is the governing body, with the head of state being the Dalai Lama. The monastics also played key roles in the democratic movements in Burma. Cantwell, Cathy and Hiroko Kawanami. 2002. "Buddhism." Pp. 41-69 in *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations* edited by L. Woodhead. London and New York: Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group.

<sup>9</sup> Rituals and ceremonies in Thai pre-reformed wats, purification rites to the household in Tibetan Buddhism, educational service, financial assistance, entertainment during festivals and charity to the masses in T'ang China (Tambiah, S. J. 1973. "Buddhism and This-Worldly Activity." *Modern Asian Studies* 7:1-20 ; Mills, Martin A 2000. "Vajra Brother, Vajra Sister: Renunciation, Individualism and the Household in Tibetan Buddhist Monasticism." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 6:17-34. Ch'en, Kenneth K. S 1976. "The Role of Buddhist Monasteries in T'ang Society." *History of Religions* 15:209-230.

<sup>10</sup> Galmiche (2010) provides an ethnographic account of a retreat in a Korean Buddhist monastery. The author argues that the retreat is an opportunity for lay devotees to be socialized into the monastic lifestyle, which has double consequences: on the one hand, it seemingly blurs the distinction between monastic and lay Buddhist; on the other hand, such distinction is again heightened at the end of the retreat when lay people go back to their lay life with various material comforts while the leading monk maintains his ascetic lifestyle in the monastery, which many lay people find difficult to embrace. Galmiche, Florence. 2010. "A Retreat in a South Korean Buddhist Monastery: Becoming a Lay Devotee through Monastic Life." *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 9(I):47-66.

## II.2. MODERNIZATION, RATIONALIZATION AND REFORMIST BUDDHISM IN SINGAPORE

Tamney (1996) gives a sociological account of the process of Western modernization in Singapore and the struggle to define the “Singapore’s soul.” From the formation of the Singaporean nation-state in the 1960s, the Singaporean state and the dominant People’s Action Party (PAP) have engaged in various efforts to engineer Singapore into a highly capitalist society where economic growth is legitimized and institutionalized in the state’s structure. The state constantly reinforces capitalism and materialism, here understood as the continuous pursuit of material wealth: “Living in Singapore is organized around making money and acquiring things. But this is encouraged by Government policies. By defending capitalism, the leaders create an environment that rewards greediness and encourages consumerism” (p.46).

In its treatment of religion, the secular state engages in efforts to modernize religions while refraining from special treatment of any particular religious groups (Wee 1990). On the one hand, the state encourages various religious activities and even initiated the religious knowledge program<sup>11</sup> in secondary school in the 1980s. On the other, it demarcates boundary between the religious and the secular sphere. Religious specialists should remain in their religious sphere and should refrain from acts that might be perceived as threats to the state’s policies. In other words, religion should contribute to the nation and the country by supporting state’s policies (Kuah 2003; Ling 1987), including capitalism and its accompanied materialist value and consumerist attitude. Given these contextual challenges, relevant questions ensue: What forms will Buddhism take in modern Singaporean society? How appealing is the monastic pursuit to Singaporean Buddhists, given the predominant materialist-consumerist value? And how do Singaporean Buddhist monastics go about practicing and teaching Buddhism in Singapore society?

Singapore is a marketplace of religions with various branches of Buddhism. One can find Sinhalese, Burmese, Thai, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese Buddhist temples and lay organizations that follow different practices in the Theravada, Mahayana, Pureland and Zen traditions (Tong 2002; Wee 1976). Yet “Buddhism” in Singapore is often mixed with Taoist practice in the complex of Chinese religion. There are Chinese religionists who call

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<sup>11</sup> The religious knowledge program (1984) was applied to Secondary 3 and 4 students. It includes Bible Knowledge, Islamic Religious Knowledge, Buddhist Studies, Confucian Ethics, Hindu Studies and Sikh Studies. It was created by the government in an attempt to inculcate “moral values” into young Singaporeans, who were seen by the government then as being too “materialistic.” For a detailed account, please see Tamney (1996:25-56).

themselves Buddhists, despite their very divergence from Buddhist doctrines (Wee 1976). Studies about Buddhism in Singapore, however, are quite scarce (Tong 2002) and so are specific studies about Singaporean Buddhist monastics. Among these limited accounts, Ling (1993) argues that since the 1980s, there is a rise of *associational* Buddhism, reflected in the increase of various Buddhist organizations in Singapore in response to the heightened interests among Singaporean Buddhists in learning about the Dhamma.

Kuah (2003) gives another account of contemporary changes in Buddhism in Singapore, which she characterized as a trend towards Reformist Buddhism. Reformist Buddhism places great emphasis on Buddhist doctrines. It is well-organized (through local and international collaboration) and has great appeal to young people who are active in promoting Buddhism and correcting its misconception (including the further differentiation between Buddhism and Taoism, of which some practices were incorporated in Chinese religion). According to the author, the Buddhist sangha, the Reformist Buddhists within the Chinese community, and the Christians, particularly the Christian fundamentalists, are agents involved in the “Buddhicization” of the Chinese religious syncretism and the movement toward Reformist Buddhism (p.1-18). Buddhist monastics, however, are not greatly valued by these modern Buddhists, who see that Enlightenment can be attained within this world, and that everyone, not exclusively monks and nuns, can become enlightened (Chia and Chee 2008 ; Kuah 2003).

One issue facing Buddhism in Singapore is the succession of monastic organizations, reflected in the lack of supply of local Buddhist monks and nuns (Kuah 2003; Ling 1993; Ong 2005; Tamney 1996). Why is it so? In the past, children were adopted by monasteries and were socialized into the monastic lifestyle. With the government’s two-child policy, fewer children were available for adoption. At the same time, the monastery has to compete with an increasing number of childless couples who also look for unwanted children(Kuah 2003) . The author also states other factors that might hinder the development of the Buddhist monastic order in Singapore, such as the Chinese emphasis on the role of the family, the high economic priority in Singapore society, and the change in religious orientation, such as Reformist Buddhism mentioned above. Kuah’s thorough study was based on her ethnographic work during the late 1980s and early 1990s; thus, some updates are necessary to reflect the present state of Buddhism and Buddhist monastics in Singapore. Previously, Singaporeans who aspired to enter monastic order often had to go overseas for training (Ling 1993). A recent development is the establishment of the Buddhist College of Singapore in 2006 to train Buddhist monastics (Chia 2009). The extent to which it encourages more Singaporean Buddhists to enter the monastic order is to be assessed.

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To sum up, the limited studies above have described the structural changes in Buddhism in Singapore and identified the shortage of Buddhist monastics as a major issue. The current research is based in this context, with a microscopic focus on what is happening on the ground. I hope to contribute to the present literature of Buddhism in Singapore by providing detailed accounts of how some Singaporeans (including Buddhists and non-Buddhists) decided to adopt the Buddhist monastic way of life in the milieu of a predominant capitalist-consumerist society. To explore and explain the process of becoming Buddhist monastics, I apply the theoretical approach from the sociology of knowledge proposed by Berger and Luckmann (1966).

### III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), “Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product” (p.61). Influenced by Marx’s sociological perspective, Berger and Luckmann point out the dialectic of man and society. Through man’s activity, the social world is created. Once it’s created, through the process of institutionalization, it obtains its objective character. It exists as an external reality from its individual members’ consciousnesses and volitions, and at the same time, it has coercive effects on the individuals, i.e. certain ways of doing things are crystallized as the only possibilities, while the alternatives face sanctions or are forced to comply. To understand the social world, the individual cannot use introspection but has to go out and learn about it.

The objective reality is internalized to the individual’s consciousness through the socialization process. Human beings are born, not as members of society, but with a “predisposition towards sociality” (p.149). Through the process of socialization, they become members of society. It starts with primary socialization, through which the social world is presented to the individual by his/her significant others (the main caregivers), and it takes the appearance of an objective, taken-for-granted reality. The individual then internalizes this world as “the world” through his/her cognitive and affective processes. Such a “world” is long-lasting, and it shapes the individual’s subjective world to a large extent. It ends when notions of self and the generalized others are formed (p.157).

Secondary socialization takes place after primary socialization, during which the individual learns specific skills and knowledge to perform certain roles. In secondary socialization, the role of emotions is not as essential as in primary socialization. The individual can learn about their roles cognitively, without having to invoke highly-charged emotions. With the expansion of educational institutes in modern society, we can expect greater importance of secondary socialization and roles of peers in the individual’s life, compared with primary socialization and family members. As individuals go about performing their roles in everyday life, their taken-for-granted reality is confirmed. Successful socialization, defined by Berger and Luckmann, is when there is a fit between objective and subjective reality. However, there are always potentials for one’s taken-for-granted world to be challenged. The threats may come from one’s conscious effort (though not easy) to reflect on its nature (e.g. the philosopher’s attitude), or marginal conditions (e.g. death), or times of crisis (when previous institutions collapse) (p.184-192).

In contrast to the possibility that the taken-for-granted world is challenged, there is another possibility that the dialectic between the social world and humankind who created it is lost in the individuals' consciousnesses, and they come to perceive the social world as totally outside of themselves. In other words, there is no way that they can affect or change it. Berger and Luckmann remind sociologists to pay attention to situations in which the counter-process, de-reification of reality (i.e. the realization that the social world is subject to change in one way or another), takes place. The two authors briefly mention *alternation* – the situation in which one's subjective reality is totally transformed. Alternation requires re-socialization, which resembles primary socialization (p.176). For it to be possible, the individuals need to learn and adopt alternative ways of seeing, perceiving and acting in the world. The plausibility structure, the social base that contributes to the maintenance of the taken-for-granted reality, is also altered as individuals form new affective and cognitive identification with new significant others. An example of alternation is religious conversion.

Going back to the research question, how can we use this sociological perspective to understand the process of becoming Buddhist monastics of some Singaporeans? Can we characterize their changes in terms of religious beliefs, practices, and identification as religious conversion or alternation? Some authors have argued that Buddhism, in particular Zen Buddhism, offers a de-reification or de-socialization perspective of reality (Bell and McGrane 2005; Moore 1995) and that conversion to Zen Buddhism involves the phenomenological process of de-reification of other realities (Moore 1995). This paper does not take a sole phenomenological focus on the process of becoming a Buddhist monastic. Rather, it takes into account changes in one's worldview, behaviors and relationships with others. In the following sections, I present the methods and procedures of the current study. I will then report my findings, how the respondents learn about Buddhism through various socialization processes to the point of renouncing worldly life to become Buddhist monastics.

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### IV. METHODS AND PROCEDURES

#### IV.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

This research project was carried out in three phases. The first phase was literature research and preliminary field work at three Buddhist sites in Singapore from September to December 2010: the Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery (KMSPKS), the Buddhist Library and the Tzu Chi Foundation. KMSPKS is the largest monastery in Singapore, housing both the Buddhist Sangha Council and the recently established Buddhist College. The other two sites were recommended by another sociology undergraduate who was also working on the topic of Buddhism in Singapore. The second phase, from January to March 2011, involved field work and in-depth interviews with Singaporean Buddhist monastics. The final phase of data analysis and writing the report was completed in March and April 2011.

#### IV.2. SAMPLING

Getting access to Singaporean Buddhist monastics was the most important, yet challenging, step in this project. Despite the existence of the Singapore Sangha Council, there is no formal list of all Buddhist monastics in Singapore. When I approached the Singapore Buddhist Federation, I was given the December publication of For You Magazine, a monthly magazine which provides updates about various Buddhist activities at different registered Buddhist societies in Singapore. A look at the publication gave a glimpse at the varieties of Buddhist organizations in Singapore, including Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana, in addition to various non-sectarian and lay organizations that are patronized by different groups of people. I combined that list with two online ones.<sup>12</sup> Based on the compiled version, I made phone calls or sent emails to almost all of the Buddhist organizations to check if there were resident monastics, and from there narrowed down the potential sites. I later visited these sites and asked for permission to interview the monastics.

As I entered the field, there were more challenges. First, it was a few weeks before the Lunar New Year, so most of the monastics were busy and refused to partake in the study. Second was the problem of access. Due to the bureaucracy of the Buddhist organizations, it was not easy to talk directly to the Buddhist monastics about the project. Many times my request for interviews<sup>13</sup> had to go through the vetting of the lay management committee, and it was turned down most of the time. Third was the language barrier. Mandarin and some Chinese dialects are used in most Buddhist temples. Since I am not Chinese-speaking, I had to look

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.buddha.sg/htm/general/temple.htm> and <http://www.dharmaweb.org/index.php/Singapore>

<sup>13</sup> See appendix A



for English-speaking Buddhist monastics to ask for interviews. Besides these strategies, I also made use of my personal networks of Buddhist friends. Snowball sampling proved useful in this project.

No Singaporean monastics from KMSPKS were able to grant interviews to me due to their busy schedules. There were no Singaporean monastics studying at the Buddhist College of Singapore when I contacted it in December 2010. A monk at the Buddhist library agreed to be interviewed. There were no resident monastics, however, at the Tzu Chi Foundation, Singapore. After my first interview, I was referred to another monastic, and from that monastic I gained access to at least three others. Since the focus of my study is on Singaporean Buddhist monastics, i.e. individuals who have grown up in Singapore and later become monastics, I included both Singaporean monastics who are now in Singapore and those who are overseas in my sample.

In total, I interviewed eleven respondents. Among the eleven respondents, one came from Malaysia and took up Singapore citizenship after graduating from university and working three years in Singapore. Another two respondents were born in the 1950s, and so they grew up being British subjects first, later Malaysia citizens, and lastly Singapore citizens. Due to the sampling criterion that respondents are Singaporeans who were born and grew up in Singapore, I chose to include the latter two cases in the sample, while excluding the former one (who did not grow up in Singapore).

Among the ten respondents included in the study, there are four monks (three follow the Theravada tradition and one practices a mixture of Theravada and Mahayana traditions) and six nuns (one in the Tibetan tradition; five in the Mahayana tradition, among whom one is in the Mahayana Zen tradition and one is in the Humanistic tradition). They reside in Buddhist centers or temples in Singapore or overseas (in Taiwan, Thailand or Europe). Some of them are traveling back and forth between Singapore and other countries. All of the respondents were born and grew up in Singapore. Two were born in the 1950s, two in the 1980s and the other six in the 1970s. Nine identify themselves as Chinese Singaporeans; one is a Peranakan. Besides the two languages, English and Mandarin, which all of them can speak, some respondents speak some Chinese dialects, depending on their parents' backgrounds, and some other languages obtained from education (e.g. Japanese, Spanish, French, etc.). They also know Pali, Sanskrit, Tibetan, Thai or Vietnamese, according to their Buddhist trainings. With regards to their highest educations, two finished their O-Levels, two graduated from local Polytechnics, and six graduated from universities (NTU, NUS, and a university in the US).



Two of them pursued post-graduate education and acquired Master and Ph.D. in Buddhist studies. One is now studying for a post-graduate degree in India.

As Singaporeans in Singapore, the respondents were exposed to Christianity, Islam, Hindu, and Taoist-Buddhist-Chinese Religionist practices during their upbringing or in the education system. Four of them attended missionary schools at least once. Some also have family members or close friends who are Christians or free thinkers. One nun shared that when she was in secondary school, she “almost became a Christian,” i.e. going to church, joining cell groups without being baptized.

It is quite common for monks to be exposed to and have experienced the practice in both Mahayana and Theravada traditions. One monk was ordained in the 1960s in the Mahayana tradition when he was a teenager, and later changed to the Theravada tradition in the 1980s. Another monk was ordained once when he was in his thirties in the Mahayana tradition, disrobed and in his late forties, was ordained again in the Thai forest tradition. Another monk identifies with both Mahayana and Theravada traditions. He was first ordained as a Mahayana monk, attended a rain retreat in Myanmar and was then ordained in the Theravada tradition.

#### IV.3. INTERVIEWS

Once the monastics agreed to participate in the project, they were asked to answer a questionnaire, which contains open-ended questions about their religious backgrounds, exposure to Buddhism, reasons to become Buddhist monastics, monastic life, and their opinions about practicing Buddhism in Singapore (see Appendix B). The questions were ordered temporally. The process of becoming a Buddhist monastic was assessed throughout one’s life course as reflected in his/her accounts of Buddhist beliefs and practices. Five monastics, due to their limited availabilities, did not answer the questionnaire. In-depth interviews were arranged with all the respondents at their convenient times and venues. For monastics residing locally, interviews were conducted at their respective temples or residences. Those residing overseas were interviewed online through Skype or international phone call.

The questionnaire proved to be useful in saving time for the respondents. They could answer it in their free time and once they have completed, the forms were collected by the researcher or sent via email. The questionnaires gave the researcher a general understanding of the respondents; their responses were clarified and further explored in the follow-up interviews. An average follow-up interview took up to an hour, while an interview on the spot (without

the survey) took two to three hours. The interviews were all conducted in English, recorded by a digital voice recorder and later transcribed for data analysis.

#### IV.4. DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected were categorized based on three main themes: exposure to Buddhist practice and teachings, decision to become monastics, and monastic life (in Singapore and/or overseas). These themes were later matched to Berger and Luckmann's concepts of socialization, de-reification and re-socialization, which were used to analyze the process of becoming Buddhist monastics.

## V. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

### V.1. SOCIALIZATION INTO BUDDHISM

Socialization into Buddhism is here understood as the process of internalizing Buddhist values and beliefs into one's subjective worldview as well as adopting Buddhist practices in his/her daily living. It takes place in the family, schools, or religious organizations. Among ten respondents, nine were born as Chinese Singaporeans and therefore, had a higher chance to be exposed to "Buddhism"<sup>14</sup> compared to Malay or Indian Singaporeans, whose ethnic identities are more or less bound with their religious identities (Islam and Hinduism). Six respondents were born in Buddhist-Taoist families and have identified themselves as "Buddhist" since childhood. One respondent was born into a Methodist-Christian family. The rest were brought up without identifying with any particular religions.<sup>15</sup> For analytical purposes, I grouped the first six ("Buddhists") into one category and the other four into another category ("Non-Buddhists"). It is important to keep in mind that the data collected were retrospective accounts, so they were duly shaped by the respondents' present views of Buddhism and memories of their past experiences.

#### V.1.1. Group 1: Buddhists

##### V.1.1.a. Primary socialization – "Buddhism" as it is brought to them through their parents

The six respondents grew up with the taken-for-granted notions of "Buddhism" and "Buddhist." Buddhism was what their parents, grandparents or relatives "do." On certain days of the Lunar Calendar (for example, the first and the fifteenth of the lunar month or Chinese New Year) or on certain Buddhist Festivities (such as Vesak day), their families would go together to the Buddhist temples to pray to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. For them, it was kind of a "family thing" to do. Some respondents regularly prayed to statues of Kuan Yin Bodhisattva at their homes' altars. This prayer ritual was often combined with ancestor worship or the Chinese religionist practice of praying to the Heavenly God. One monk was brought to the Buddhist temple by his father who used to be a collector of the talismans and amulets<sup>16</sup> created by Thai monks.

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<sup>14</sup> "Buddhism" here is seen as a religious label that individuals identify with and present to others.

<sup>15</sup> Even though the practice of ancestor worship was observed in either their families or in the grandparents' household, they did not identify with any particular religions.

<sup>16</sup> Yee (1992) has a detailed study of Thai Buddhism and its influence in Singapore. Yee, Shirley Meng Sam. 1992. "Thai Buddhist Cosmology and Its Influence in Singapore." Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, Singapore.

All of the six respondents saw themselves as Buddhists since they were young. While some grew up being happy-go-lucky Buddhists, some were more devout and unquestioningly adopted the “Buddhist” practices (including food taboos, prayer rituals) which they learned from their parents or relatives. One nun shared that she regarded herself as a Buddhist even though, in retrospect, her family’s religious practice was more of a “Taoist – traditional Chinese worship.” Born into a “pretty religious household,” her mother became a spirit medium when she was eleven, and she helped her mother as an assistant in her trance sessions. Another nun shared that she had always avoided beef because of her family’s belief that if they prayed to Kuan Yin Bodhisattva, they should not eat beef, which was later found out to not be “a right view” according to doctrinal Buddhism. When her aunt taught her a Chinese chanting of the Kuan Yin Bodhisattva, she tried to “make sure” that she chanted it three times a day. These examples illustrate how early notions of “Buddhism” were formed in the respondents’ subjective realities during primary socialization and how as “Buddhists,” some respondents enact “Buddhist” practices in their daily lives.

#### V.1.1.b. Secondary socialization – Rediscovery of the “real” Buddhism

Secondary socialization is added onto the background of primary socialization and the already-formed subjective reality. In this process, education (and the cognitive process to internalize what is taught) plays a large part. The taken-for-granted “Buddhist” identity, which was to a large extent ingrained in the respondents’ subjective realities, oriented their choices of the activities they involved in when they were schooling. Four of the respondents, born in the 1970s, went through the religious knowledge program in the 1980s. Two of them chose Buddhist Studies. When asked why, their answers were the same: “Because I’m a Buddhist.” One respondent was quite happy to take a Buddhist Studies course:

... At that point in time when we were studying it, it was just another subject. But it was *cool* as well because we started to realize, "Oh, wow." I mean there are all of these *cool teachings* and *good stuff* about Buddhism... (Mahayana and Theravada monk)

The affective tone in his statement, shown in words such as “cool” and “good stuff,” is noteworthy because affection is important in order for one to develop strong identification with his or her Buddhist identity.

Contacts with Buddhist books often changed the respondents’ previous notions of Buddhism. Reading Buddhist books, they *discovered* ideas and teachings that resonated with their values

and personalities. One respondent was given<sup>17</sup> a Buddhist book when she was fourteen and described how she felt:

What I think attracted me in those literature, the very thin book, they talk about (...) the Bodhisattva path. That really *hit a chord* in me. I wanted to. I mean I've seen my mum helping up... helping people. And I wanted to be chosen to, to help. So when I come in touch with Buddhism at that time it was like "Oh so there is such a thing called the Bodhisattva path. I was really *head over heel*. So I thought, "Yeah, I want to be a Buddhist I want to be a *real* Buddhist." (Mahayana nun, Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies<sup>18</sup>)

From intermittent contacts with doctrinal Buddhism, the respondents became increasingly involved in Buddhist activities. The above nun, after getting to know a Buddhist monastic, made frequent visits to her teacher's temple. She took the Three Refuges to become a *real* Buddhist at sixteen, and at eighteen, with the support of her Taoist-medium-turned-Buddhist mother, she left her family to stay in the temple. Other respondents joined Buddhist groups in polytechnics or universities. The role of Buddhist groups is very significant. They are points of contact through which information about Buddhist activities is disseminated to young Buddhists. They also act as the plausibility structure for young Buddhists to socialize themselves. Through various activities like dharma talks, social-welfare activities, visits to temples, dharma camps and retreats, young Buddhists are motivated to learn, discuss, share, propagate, and practice Buddhism:

I joined the Buddhist society and *yah*, it's from this society I get in contact with the teachings of the Buddha because in the Buddhist society, they have many revenues and contacts various different Buddhist groups. This is how I'm exposed to the Buddhist circle in Singapore (...) In the beginning, actually I only know how to chant Buddhist scriptures *lah* but didn't really understand what the Buddha really taught. From there... so I started to get the doctrinal aspects of the teachings. And also started to learn some basic meditation, get exposed to the meditation practice. (Thai forest tradition novice monk)

It is not a coincidence that the respondents were core members or leaders in various Buddhist groups. In these positions, they were strongly motivated to be role models, be knowledgeable about Buddhist teachings and to put into practice what they had learned. As close friends, members of Buddhist groups were elements of a support structure that reinforced the Buddhist reality among themselves:

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<sup>17</sup> By a flower stallholder whom she bought flowers for her mother who was then a spirit medium.

<sup>18</sup> This respondent also went through the religious knowledge program. Even though she insisted to the school administration, she could not take Buddhist studies in a missionary school.

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... At that time, in the committee (...) five of us, all wanted to become monastics. Yeah, so... there is... the *energy* is very *strong* there (...) It is also very *inspiring* to the rest of the members of the society. (Mahayana nun, Master in Buddhist study)

The activities organized by Buddhist groups, even though they provide good opportunities to learn and practice the Dhamma, are often broad in their orientations. The members are exposed to different traditions and practices. The respondents often intensified their exposures to Buddhism by participating in regular Buddhist courses at Buddhist centers or in short-term monastic retreats to get the experience of monastic lifestyle.

I thought what I knew was not quite enough. I wanted to *know more* and *deeper* about what the Buddha actually taught, and because I'm academically inclined you see. So I thought... yeah, Buddhist Library the course outline seems interesting, academic discussions and stuffs. So that's why I took it up. (Mahayana nun, Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies)

Through these deeper exposures to Buddhism, the respondents came to change their preconceived notions of Buddhism. Being leaders or core members of Buddhist groups, they identified more and more with their newfound religious teachings, practices and communities. There was an ethical aspect in their transformation. Most respondents turned vegetarian even before they became monastics. The Buddhist reality was strengthened not only through their cognitive understanding, but also through the body-emotion complex (during deep meditations) and through the very experiences of putting Buddhism in their daily lives:

... In NS life, I witness the truth that the Buddha taught about being virtue. Things like if you are *friendly*, *hardworking*, *you're not biased* (...) And the one thing is, I am *very happy* because I'm *at ease*. Unlike the rest, they are unhappy. Because they're in NS and they keep a lot of unhappiness. They're not at ease already. Then they're lazy, cannot work well... I'm at ease and I don't have enemy. I'm not scared of anybody harm me. I'm beneficial to people... (Thai forest tradition novice monk)

In addition to engaging in Buddhist societies and reading Buddhist books, getting to know a Buddhist teacher personally is also very critical. The Buddhist teachers make the Buddhist reality more real to other people because, more than anyone else, they are the agents that sustain Buddhism as a religion. Being close to their teachers, the enthusiastic young Buddhists learned both Buddhist teachings and their teachers' personalities and lifestyles. Sometimes it is their teachers that brought them closer to the monastic communities and inspired them to follow the monastic path.

[My teacher] is very *different*. I was just very *attracted* to her. And she could teach me Buddhism that nobody around at the time could teach. And I remembered asking her stupid questions... she managed to teach me and yes I got *convinced* and I thought I want to follow this teacher. At least be a *true* Buddhist under her *lah*. (Mahayana nun, Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies)

### V.1.2. Group 2: Non-Buddhists

The second group included two monks and two nuns. The two monks were born in the 1950s and the two nuns in 1970s and 1980s. They were not born into Buddhist families; one monk was born in a Christian household and the other three were born without any religious identification. One nun went to Catholic primary school, which has to some degree influenced her relationship to religion. In her words, "...the feeling of silence, the feeling of prayer, the feeling of spirituality, was really, to certain extent, ingrained. Because you were there for six years right?" (Mahayana Zen nun)

The first monk, born into Christian household, learned about Buddhism through a visit to a Buddhist temple and was impressed by its practices. This prompted him to attend Buddhist Sunday schools and he decided to become a monk after his secondary school. He was initially ordained in the Mahayana tradition at KMSPKS and later converted to Theravada Buddhism (he spent four years in the forest in Thailand, however). The other monk was first ordained in the Mahayana tradition (also at KMSPKS) in his thirties but disrobed a few years after. He decided to follow the Thai forest tradition in his late forties and has remained a monk since then. The impression that the two monks gave me as a researcher was at the beginning of the two interviews with them. They talked at length about doctrinal Buddhism. They were very knowledgeable about religions and gave me detailed comparisons between different Monotheist religions (especially Christianity) and Buddhism, and between different forms of Buddhism. Even though two of them had gone through monastic trainings in the Mahayana and Theravada traditions (at different degrees), they chose to follow Theravada Buddhism in the end. The reasons given were that Theravada Buddhism, compared to the Mahayana tradition that they had followed, placed less emphasis on rituals, and it adhered in the strictest sense to the Buddha's teachings. Buddhism, to them, required individual efforts to work for their own salvation, not to rely on an external god or being.

The two nuns' first contacts with Buddhism were through books by famous Buddhist teachers, which caught them as "interesting" because they "made so much sense" to them.

I happened to see this newspaper about a Western nun who meditated in a cave in India for 12 years (...) I only read about her on the newspaper. And then I got *very interested* because in the article, she said Singaporeans are like *birds in a cage*, always running around to fly, nevertheless you could not find the *true way to happiness*. That's why I was *very interested* and I went to the library and I borrowed a book about her biography. (Nun in the Humanistic Buddhist tradition, now in Taiwan)



With strong interests in Buddhism, they read more Buddhist books, and later on immersed themselves in the monastic environment, which they enjoyed. One attended a Buddhist College in Taiwan when she was in her late 20s; the other, during her university holidays, spent a few weeks in a Buddhist monastery in France, and after that attended retreats offered by monastics in the same tradition. Both did meditation on their own (though not regularly) and became vegetarian before they actually became Buddhist monastics.

To sum up, what the four respondents in the second group shared is that even though they were not brought up in Buddhist households, they found that Buddhist doctrines “made sense” to them. There is certain elective affinity between their world-views, personalities, and the Buddhist ethical lifestyle that strongly motivated them to learn more about Buddhism and practice it. Now, let us move to the crux of the matter. Why did they decide to become Buddhist monastics, a seemingly total change in their lifestyles?

## V.2. DE-REIFICATION OF OTHER REALITIES AND THE CRITICAL DECISION TO BECOME BUDDHIST MONASTICS

Being socialized into Buddhism and exposed the monastic lifestyle, the respondents first thought of following the Buddhist monastic path when they were reading a good Buddhist book, in the midst of a retreat or a dharma talk. However, as they went about their daily lives, the predominant, objective reality they faced was the capitalist-consumerist Singapore society where becoming a Buddhist monastic was not a commonly-understood life goal. As children born in Chinese families where filial piety is emphasized, the respondents were expected to support their parents in old age. As Singaporeans, they were often confronted with a normative, institutionally-shaped life trajectory: Study hard, get a degree, land a good job, earn good money, get married, and raise a family... the cycle goes on. In this context, the monastic lifestyle tends to be at odds with societal norms: Being celibate, the monastics do not produce children for their parents and for the country. Living on alms, they are unable to support their parents financially or produce economically for Singapore. So what are the reasons why they went forth into the monastic way of life?

Before their critical decisions to go forth, the respondents went through a process that can be referred to as the de-reification of other realities. It means the capitalist-consumerist reality and the normative life trajectory described above were no longer perceived as inevitable, and the respondents could choose to follow the alternative lifestyle of a monastic. Contemplation about their own existence was catalyzed by Buddhist meditations and real life experiences, such as the loss of a good friend or a friend's father. These marginal conditions made them



reflect on the fragility of life, which to a certain extent relativized the taken-for-granted life course that they had been taught:

When I was a teenager, when I was in secondary school, one of my friends, classmates, she died in a car accident, and so that was what prompted me to ask questions about, "Oh, *what's the meaning of life? Coz someone can just disappear like that. What's the meaning of death?*" Things like that so I guessed I've always asked those kinds of questions. What's the meaning of life? What *is true happiness* and things like that? (Mahayana Zen nun)

After being exposed to Buddhism, they came to a point where there was a transformation in their consciousnesses. The basic Buddhist teachings were ingrained in them so much that they came to realize that they wanted to devote their lives completely to Buddhist practices and renounce all worldly attachments such as money, career and relationships. The socialization process into Buddhism contributed to bringing the respondents (of both groups, the Buddhists or non-Buddhists) closer to the Buddhist reality, either in their subjective world view (the impermanence and unsatisfactory nature of life) or in the plausibility structure that supported this world view (made up of, for example, Buddhist groups, close friends, and teachers). Perhaps here we can talk about Berger and Luckmann's concept of *alternation*, i.e. the Buddhist monastic reality became the respondents' dominant reality, displacing all others.

Through life experiences, I keep reflecting what are we searching in this life. *What do we want to achieve? Why you study so hard? To get a good job? To get money? Why you wanna get money, to get a good life? Why you need a good life, because we all pursue one thing, happiness.* This is one way of pursuing happiness but the Buddha suggested a second way to happiness. So I realize actually the Buddha is quite correct. That the outside... *Happiness that is sustained by external conditions is suffering because, why? Because it's never sustained.* External things always change, not stable, cannot control... Through these reflections and understandings, I said, I'm *ready to put down*, but not completely. I'm willing to put these things aside and go forth for another kind of happiness. (Thai forest tradition novice monk)

When making the decision to go forth, most monks looked for the very mysterious spiritual experience of Enlightenment for themselves. In comparison, the nuns, who all follow the Mahayana tradition, wanted to pursue Enlightenment by practicing what the Buddha taught and relieving the suffering of sentient beings. Once they had made the decision to follow the Buddhist monastic lifestyle, however, there were other factors to consider: Would their parents and family members be taken care of in their absence? Who would be guiding them, and which monastic community would they be living with? Most of the time, their parents did not approve of their decision. Some of them decided to postpone their ordination and gave some time (which can take a few years) to prepare their parents to get used to the idea. Most of their siblings were quite supportive, without fully understanding their reasons. The

responses from friends,<sup>19</sup> be they supportive, “pleasantly surprised,” “puzzled,” or reactive, are not so important to their decision. One of the respondents, seeing the attachments that their family and friends had to him, was even more determined to practice as a monk so as to help his beloved ones later:

Because why? Because when they have the kind of attachment to your presence, that means they cherish you, they have the love for you. Then I question myself, what can I give to people who are dear to me? Money? (...) When your relatives or your dear ones are going to die, cancer, bedridden, cannot move, strokes? As an external person, what can we help? We cannot help them actually. At the moment of death, what can we help them? Money? If someone is sick, we wish them good health to recover soon, but it does not solve the problem. But the dharma that the Buddha taught is to overcome these problems, aging, illness, death. It can only be realized ourselves. All I can do is to tell you the way. *If I know the way, I can tell other people. I can lead them to solve their own problems - isn't it better?* (Thai forest tradition novice monk)

Finding a monastic teacher to be ordained under and a community to live with was the next step. Some respondents went forth in the Buddhist community that they had been practicing with while some others had to wait for a year or so to find a suitable teacher and community.

### V.3. RE-SOCIALIZATION INTO MONASTIC ORDER

Re-socialization into the monastic order is the process of really becoming a Buddhist monastic. It involves changing one’s perception, behavior and lifestyle to fit that of a monastic. One also learns to live with other monastics in a Buddhist community and also serves the laity when capable. Sometimes the monastic community becomes one’s new home – The teacher and the monastics in the community become one’s new significant others (“brothers” or “sisters”) who share common goals of attaining Enlightenment and/or serving sentient beings.

Contrary to popular belief, the monastic way of life encompasses more than long hours spent in sitting meditation or chanting. It comes with many other commitments to oneself, to the Buddhist community and to the wider society. Before ordination, a person often has to go through the observation period during which he/she lives in a Buddhist monastic community and practices as a lay person. During this observation period, he/she is referred to as an “aspirant.” It is a period for the aspirant to assess his/her motivation and for the community to evaluate if he/she is suitable to become monastics. A typical day in the monastery starts early in the morning (3.30am, 4.30am, or 5.30am depending on the tradition) and ends at around

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<sup>19</sup> Some of them did not have many friends and their increasing involvements in the Buddhist monastic communities, to certain extent, distanced them from other networks of friends.

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9.30-10.00pm. Activities include sitting meditation, chanting, study, work and meals in between.

The monastic lifestyle is very different to the laity's. Monastic disciplines, community living and limited material comforts can be challenges too. Below are some quotes shared by respondents about the real challenges they experienced while adopting the monastic way of life:

[During my novice years] I was not doing something special. To a lot of people right, the thing that being a monk or being a nun, you do a lot of chanting, you do a lot of meditation, you do a lot of practice right? But that's all wrong because in the temple you do a lot of work (...) In fact, I think the length of time that I was holding the broom is more than the time I was holding a pen. I really like to study and I really like to study on the dharma. But *there was no time* (...) The first 2 years was *very tough* because I was thinking... Why did I leave my job, my comfortable life, and come here to sweep the floor and then clean cat's urine and all these things? (Mahayana nun, now studying in India)

[One difficulty is] to live together with somebody whom we don't know. We might know each other as members or volunteers here. But truly to live together as monks, or as nuns, it's not easy - *community living*. Because Singaporeans, they went to school, they went through so many things and they say, I'm so and so. And then there's so much pride or arrogance - I want to enjoy aircon, I want this, I want that (...) Then we need to do our own housekeeping, wash our own clothes. There's no maid. You iron your own clothes. At home maybe mother do for you, maid do for you. Here, everything is on your own. (Tibetan Buddhist nun)

If the aspirant is keen after the observation period, he/she will be ordained as a novice monk or nun. The noviceship could take up to three years, and during that period there were further difficulties as well as satisfactions.

Difficulties? There are lots of difficulties. You need lots of *sacrifice*. The most difficulty initially is *loneliness*. Can you bear to be lonely? That's one thing you must ask yourself first. You don't join a monastic life just to enjoy yourself or whatever, but to stay alone from everybody by yourself quietly. That is something whereby you need very *strong effort*. (Theravada monk)

After noviceship, the novice proceeds through higher ordination, which means he or she then becomes a full-fledged monk or nun, properly called bhikkhu/bhikkuni, or real disciple of the Buddha. A monk or nun takes the monastic vows and precepts and assumes more responsibilities in the Buddhist community (depending on the tradition). After at least five years living in the monastic community, he or she can choose to continue to stay or leave it to serve the various needs of the laity (such as conducting Dhamma classes, counseling sessions, and other social engagements). Sometimes serving the community takes a toll on their physical and spiritual wellbeing.

One thing that I notice is that in Singapore, one difficulty that I have here is more focus on the service aspect (for the laity)... So that takes a toll on our physical as well. I mean, you have 24 hours. You have that amount of waking hours. If you spend all your time meditating, you're like super-charged - you're not tired. But if you were to use that time, either traveling to places to conduct talks or just sitting down for an interview (laugh), it's draining. (Mahayana and Theravada monk)

In the interviews, the respondents also shared how some of their friends could not join the monastic order due to family responsibilities. Some others shared how some of their close friends or family members, after being a monastic for a few years, disrobed because of family's difficulties or dissatisfaction with the monastic lifestyle. One respondent, who himself was ordained and disrobed before, explained:

Respondent: Why a person disrobes, because he doesn't have even a bit of realization. You have a bit of realization, then you will want to press on. It is like that (...)

Interviewer: Why didn't continue with the first ordination?

Respondent: Because I'm not ripe yet. It's like a mango, or tree. Right conditions means, everything... I mean you have *no more longing for a lay life*. Lay life, whatever you want to do, you do. Whatever you want to achieve, you achieve (...) but your mind is still empty. You need to eat this spiritual food. (Thai forest tradition monk)

To sum up the findings, the process of becoming Buddhist monastic involves the socialization into Buddhist reality, the de-reification of other realities and the re-socialization into Buddhist monastic reality. Socialization into Buddhism can begin during childhood (if one is born into Buddhist families) or later. The Buddhist reality is constructed and reinforced through one's interaction with other Buddhists (family members, friends, and monastic models) and his/her reflections of Buddhist teachings in his/her daily life. Through life experiences and interactions with Buddhists and non-Buddhists, he/she comes to a point where there is a de-reification of other realities, i.e. the alternative lifestyles such having a good career, finding a partner or living with their parents are no longer seen as appealing. There is a nearly total transformation of his/her subjective worldview, called *alternation*. The Buddhist monastic way of life becomes a calling – the most meaningful life goal is to become a monastic, to devote time and energy for spiritual practice, and to attain spiritual liberation. During such process, he/she may be challenged by external conditions (such as parents' objections, stringent monastic disciplines, etc.) and internal conditions (such as difficulties in overcoming his/her own shortcomings or keeping up with the monastic vows), which can make him/her reconsider the initial monastic aspiration or even decide disrobe. Nonetheless, once he/she successfully re-socializes into the monastic life, there is great satisfaction. For the monks and nuns interviewed in this study, Enlightenment can be attained in this world through their

personal efforts to recognize, understand and transform the unwholesome habits, to reinforce the wholesome ones, and to perfect themselves. The pursuit of Enlightenment is the pursuit of a kind of happiness that is not determined by external conditions but sustained by an internal sense of satisfaction and content.

The monastics in this study have also shown that the monastic life is not as other-worldly as sitting down and enjoying meditation bliss. The real monastic trainings involve many seemingly mundane things (e.g. doing temple chores), and the monastic vocation includes serving the laity's needs. In the multicultural Singapore, monastics are involved in a wide range of activities to share the Dhamma, such as giving classes, teaching meditation, engaging with young people, conducting spiritual counseling to couples, families and inmates, performing funeral services, and participating in cultural activities (e.g. Vesak and Lunar New Year celebration). Some of the respondents are trying to raise the profile of Buddhism in Singapore by engaging in inter-faith discussions or working with various religious and governmental organizations. Due to the small number of monastics in Singapore, they sometimes have to serve different roles and accommodate hectic schedules, which take a toll on their spiritual and physical wellbeing. Being a Buddhist monastic in a predominantly consumerist-capitalist society like Singapore is not easy. First, the monastics have to keep their spiritual practices and monastic code of conduct. Second, they also need to have a presentable outlook when working with lay people or other religious groups. In other words, their Buddhist monastic reality needs constant maintenance. In the interviews, the respondents emphasized how critical it is to sustain the strong monastic aspiration, the *Bodhicitta*, and to find a balance between their various roles. In the words of a Mahayana nun, "balance means healthy tension."

## VI. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In this qualitative research paper, I have described the process through which some individuals, born and raised in the modern capitalist-consumerist Singapore society, gradually become Buddhist monastics. Using Berger and Luckmann's (1966) sociology of knowledge as a theoretical framework, I posit that this process involves the socialization of individuals into the Buddhist reality, the de-reification of other realities and the re-socialization into Buddhist monastic reality. As far as this paper is concerned, the process of becoming Buddhist monastics might not be well-characterized as religious conversion because the respondents did not radically change their religious beliefs, but intensified their Buddhist practices and commitments over time. They came to the realization that being Buddhist monastics was the only thing they wanted to devote to during their lifetimes, thus, the term *alternation* might better describe the phenomenon in question.

Due to the researcher's limited Chinese language capability and the inaccessibility of some Buddhist monastics, the Chinese speaking monks and nuns, as well as those at the high-level of Buddhist organizations, were not included in this study. Despite the small size of the research sample, this study has gathered in-depth information about the lives of some Singaporean Buddhist monastics in terms of their religious beliefs, practices, and social engagements. The diversity of Buddhist traditions that the respondents follow reflects the diverse forms of Buddhism that Singaporeans are exposed to nowadays. The respondents in this study speak English (besides other languages) and are engaged in a wide variety of activities (with lay people or various religious and social organizations). I believe that despite the limitations, the findings from this study can contribute to a better understanding of Buddhism in Singapore.

This study suggests while the blank "Buddhist" label does not account for the actual Buddhist practices on the ground (Wee 1976), it remains important for sociological analysis because it is part of the individuals' self images, which may make them more likely to be exposed to orthodox Buddhist teachings and practices. In addition, this study provides a more updated and detailed account of the phenomenon of becoming a Buddhist monastic, compared to Kuah's (2003) earlier study. It has analyzed in depth the process of becoming a Buddhist monastic by applying Berger and Luckmann's theoretical framework. Factors that contribute to one's decision to follow the monastic path include: exposure in Buddhism to the point of having strong identification (cognitive and affective ties) with Buddhism and the Buddhist community, strong determination to practice the Buddhist teachings and leave behind worldly

attachments (e.g. career, family, relationships) and having favorable conditions (including family's support, Buddhist teachers and community) to become a Buddhist monastic.

The stories of the Buddhist monastics in this study also illustrate changes in their personal beliefs and practices as well as those of their families. These stories are situated in the midst of changes in Buddhism at the structural level. Even though some authors have characterized such changes as a trend towards Reformist Buddhism and argued that role of Buddhist monastics is decreasing in modern Buddhism in general and in Reformist Buddhism in Singapore in particular (Chia and Chee 2008 ; Kuah 2003), the current study suggests that Buddhist monastics continue to be important in spreading the Buddhist teachings and inspiring others to join the monastic community. As there is not a unifying body of Buddhist monastics and due to the current lack of quantitative data collected on Buddhist monastics in Singapore, it is difficult to assess whether the number of monastics is increasing or decreasing.

This study has attempted to discern the various factors that motivate some to follow the Buddhist monastic way of life. As pointed out earlier, there are cases of monastics who disrobed and also hesitations on the part of lay Buddhists to enter the monastic order. However, these points were only briefly mentioned in this study. As a potential avenue for investigation, future studies may consider focusing on lay Buddhists and assessing the degree to which they find the monastic vocation appealing. Studies of why some devout Buddhists do not choose to follow the monastic path or why some Buddhist monastics disrobe and return to lay life can shed light on the phenomenon of becoming and being a Buddhist monastic.



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## The Pursuit of Enlightenment and the Singaporean Buddhist Monastics

### APPENDICES

#### APPENDIX A: REQUEST FOR INTERVIEW – MESSAGE TO BUDDHIST ORGANIZATIONS

Dear Respected Buddhist Organisation and Community,

I'm Nguyen Thi Gia Hoang, a final-year sociology student at the Nanyang Technological University. I am conducting graduate research project, "The Pursuit of Enlightenment and the Social Roles of Buddhist Monks and Nuns in Contemporary Singapore." The research is to find out the various factors that have led some Singaporeans to follow the Buddhist monastic path.

I am looking for interview respondents who are Singaporeans who have gone forth and are currently Buddhist monastics and who are willing to share their experiences. Please be assured that the respondent's identity and the content of the interviews will be strictly kept confidential.

If you are able to assist the research or if you have any questions about anything related to this project, **please contact me at (+65) 9715 9726 or email: [giahoadl@gmail.com](mailto:giahoadl@gmail.com)**

Thank you very much and I'm looking forward to your responses.

*With Best Regards,*

Nguyen Thi Gia Hoang  
Final Year Student  
Division of Sociology  
Nanyang Technological University  
H/p: (+65) 9715 9726  
Email: [giahoadl@gmail.com](mailto:giahoadl@gmail.com)

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Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to:

**Sociology Ethics Committee c/o Head of Division**  
Division of Sociology  
Nanyang Technological University  
14 Nanyang Drive, Singapore 637 332  
E-mail: H-DSOC@ntu.edu.sg  
Tel: (65) 6316 8730 / 6790 5668

## APPENDIX B: SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I'm Nguyen Thi Gia Hoang, a final-year sociology student at the Nanyang Technological University. I am conducting graduate research project, "The Pursuit of Enlightenment and the Social Roles of Buddhist Monks and Nuns in Contemporary Singapore." The research is to find out the various factors that have led some Singaporeans to follow the Buddhist monastic path and I would like to find out more about this topic from you as someone who has gone forth and is currently a Buddhist monastic.

This survey questionnaire should take about half to an hour to finish. All the information provided in this survey will be kept confidential between the researcher and the respondent.

Please answer all the questions honestly. Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary and you may skip any question you don't want to answer. If you have any questions about anything related to this project, **please contact me at (+65) 9715 9726 or email: [giahoangdl@gmail.com](mailto:giahoangdl@gmail.com)**

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I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

|                     |           |       |
|---------------------|-----------|-------|
| _____               | _____     | _____ |
| Names of Researcher | Signature | Date  |
| _____               | _____     | _____ |
| Name of Participant | Signature | Date  |

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to:

**Sociology Ethics Committee c/o Head of Division**

Division of Sociology  
Nanyang Technological University  
14 Nanyang Drive, Singapore 637 332  
E-mail: H-DSOC@ntu.edu.sg  
Tel: (65) 6316 8730 / 6790 5668

## SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire includes **7 (seven)** pages in total and should take about half to an hour to finish. All the information provided in this survey will be kept confidential between the researcher and the respondent.

Please answer all the questions honestly. Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary and you may skip any question you don't want to answer. If you have any questions about anything related to this project, **please contact me at (+65) 9715 9726 or email: [giahoangdl@gmail.com](mailto:giahoangdl@gmail.com)**

### **PART I: BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND**

Please fill in the blanks with your information

Year of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Highest education: \_\_\_\_\_

Language capability: \_\_\_\_\_

Buddhist tradition: \_\_\_\_\_

Years of being ordained into monastic order: \_\_\_\_\_

### **PART II: BECOMING A BUDDHIST MONASTIC**

#### **A. EXPOSURE TO BUDDHIST TEACHINGS AND PRACTICES**

- 1) What is your religious background? (i.e. your parents' or significant others' religious beliefs and practices, your religious education and exposure)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- 2) When were you first exposed to Buddhist teachings, ideas and doctrines?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
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\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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3) When and where did you start taking Buddhist lessons?

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4) How long did you follow these courses?

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5) When were you first exposed to Buddhist practices (i.e. chanting, meditation, etc.)?

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6) When did you start Buddhist practices?

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7) What were your Buddhist practices then?

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8) Have your Buddhist practices changed over time and how?

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**B. REASONS TO BECOME BUDDHIST MONASTIC**

1) What are the most important reasons why you became a Buddhist monastic? (Please choose the items that best describe your experiences. You can choose MORE THAN ONE item).

- a) To pursue Enlightenment
- b) To earn merit for myself
- c) To earn merit for my family
- d) To relieve the suffering of all beings
- e) Other reasons (Please list):

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2) When did you first think of becoming a Buddhist monastic?

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3) When did you decide to become a Buddhist monastic?

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4) What are the factors that you considered when you made that decision?

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5) When did you let others know of your decision and who did you let known?

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6) How did they react to your decision?

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7) Did their reactions make you reconsider your initial decision?

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8) What are the requirements that you have to fulfill to enter monkhood/ nunhood?

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9) Did these requirements influence your decision?

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**C. BEING A BUDDHIST MONASTIC**

1) What Buddhist tradition or sect that you decide to follow?

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2) Why did you choose that tradition or sect?

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The Pursuit of Enlightenment and the Singaporean Buddhist Monastics

3) When and where did you start as a novice monk/ nun?

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4) How long was your noviceship?

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5) When and where were you formally ordained as a bhikkhu or bhikkhuni?

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6) How did you find your monastic trainings?

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7) Besides your monastic trainings, what are the **social roles** that you have to perform for other people as a Buddhist monastic (e.g. rituals, spiritual counseling, welfare services, etc.)?

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8) What are the difficulties you have faced as a Buddhist monastic?

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9) What are the supporting factors that you have received being a Buddhist monastic?

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10) What are the most significant events during your monastic life?

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**PART III: PERSONAL OPINIONS**

1) According to you, does being a Singaporean make it easier or harder to become a Buddhist monastic?

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2) Could you explain why?

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3) What are the satisfactions that you have had as a Buddhist monastic?

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4) Do you have any regrets for making the decision to become a Buddhist monastic?

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5) What advice would you give to a young Singaporean who would like to enter the Buddhist monastic order?

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Would you be available for a follow-up interview? If yes, please leave your contact, preferred time and venue here:

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Thank you very much for your participation. Your contribution will greatly benefit this study and broaden the sociological understanding of Buddhist monastic life in particular and religion in general.

Wish you well and happy in the New Year.