

2011 Scott Kloeck-Jenson International Pre-Dissertation Travel Grant Prakirati Satasut

With the support from Scott-Kloeck Jenson International Pre-Dissertation Travel Grant, I spent a period of ten weeks this summer conducting preliminary fieldwork among urban Buddhists in Thailand. With the rise in meditation practice and commercial Buddhist prints throughout urban centers in Thailand in recent years, the initial premise of this project was to examine contemporary urban meditation movements as a site of religious renewal and change as well as consider how Buddhism could be the source for political, social and cultural expression, particularly at a time when moral discourse on purity and goodness informed much of public debate on governance, authority and political action.

I started my fieldwork with day trips to a few meditation centers within and around Bangkok. At each center, I participated in the merit-making ceremony, meditation session and dhamma instruction, while observing and carrying out informal interview with participants and administrators. Historically, meditation was a strictly monastic affair, and lay people were viewed not suitable to such undertaking because practicing meditation entailed the renunciation of the world. During the times of my fieldwork, however, I noticed that many urban dwellers vigorously sought out meditation teachers and programs, listened to audio sermons in their office and car, and read Buddhist self-help books out of their desire not only to find ways to deal with pressure arising from uncertainties in the rapidly changing economy, but also to stake out their claims of belonging to an imagined moral community. In this sense, the practice of meditation became a technique of self-realization that found its place in everyday life among a highly urban, cosmopolitan and middle class demographic group.

At the same time, through a network of meditation practitioners that I had already known, I undertook in-depth interview with a number of lay people, who practiced meditation on a regular basis and considered themselves to be serious practitioners. These lay people were selected for interview not only on the basis of their practice, but also because of their involvement in proselytizing activities, whether in temples that they located their affinity, or among non-monastic groups that they belonged. Most of them were active in the process of producing and distributing meditation manuals and dhamma books, while many had also been keenly involved in new media activities, especially in creating and maintaining internet webboards and websites that allowed for the public sharing of teaching by famous monks and lay meditation teachers in both written and audio forms.

From these interviews, I started to have a better picture of how such grass-root activism put in place the communication infrastructure that linked together networks of lay meditation practitioners and provided public forum, where guidance, discussion, deliberation and proselytization could occur and proliferate. The issue of Buddhist public sphere is one of the areas that I wish to examine further in my dissertation fieldwork.

After this period of exploration, I came to recognize that there were many active lay Buddhist groups that had played a crucial role in providing meditation instruction, non-monastic meditation space, and religious activities that aimed at family and youth in the urban sphere. My attention then became increasingly drawn to these groups, which were mostly organized in the form of non-profit foundation or association. At the center of their

effort was the desire to propagate Buddhist teaching and practice of mindfulness meditation, which was conceived to be an instrument that enhanced the moral well-being of both practitioner and society.

Because “mindfulness meditation” was a broad label with many interpretive possibilities, these groups were also enthusiastically engaged in the work of ascertaining and translating doctrinal sources into what they deemed to be appropriate mode of practice. Viewing these groups as “gatekeepers” that controlled and directed the flows of cultural meaning and interaction, the history, activity and mission of these groups became the point of exploration in my second phase of fieldwork. During this period, I interviewed senior representatives from three separate Buddhist groups, participated in their activities, and collected documents from each place that detailed its formation, principles and works that they had been doing. Because administering and promoting mindfulness meditation involved many different actors and required much thought, financial support, human resource, and management skill, the very practice itself could be examined as both a cultural project as well as a location of change, where one could come to see how processes and interests converged, colluded and collided.

One of the most important aspects of such confluence had to do with the issue of state-society relations. At the time when the dominant political discourse was centered around the issue of corruption among rural electorate, who was seen as willing accomplice of vote-buying and thus inept to make a decision of their own, such emphasis on moral development made the practice of meditation into a gesture of not only coping mechanism and class distinction, but also political expression. The religious and secular authority took up this matter on a national level and proposed policy and institutional directive that aimed at promoting mindfulness meditation as a way to realize utilitarian ethics. Provincial meditation centers were set up, meditation curriculum standardized through the deliberation of the central religious authority, and governmental bodies undertook anti-corruption and good governance campaign that placed mindfulness meditation at one of the foci of its undertaking. Even though there is a good reason to view such attempt as a form of moral posturing, I believe that how the authority responds and becomes involved in this matter presents a much more complex picture than that. One of my hopes is to explore this issue more thoroughly and analytically in order to engage with the question as to how mindfulness meditation can be a lens into which we come to see the process in which Buddhism is re-inventing itself.

In closing, I would like to express my appreciation toward the support from the Scott-Kloeck Jenson grant and acknowledge the significant role that the Jenson family and Global Studies have played in allowing me to undertake this pre-dissertation fieldwork. This summer field research will decisively play a significant part in shaping the conceptualization of my dissertation proposal and fieldwork.