

ACCOUNTS OF VIETNAMESENESS

ACCOUNTS OF VIETNAMESENESS: MAPPING VIETNAMESE BUDDHISM(S) IN
MONTREAL

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A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Religious Studies in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Master of Arts Degree

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Lay Abstract

This thesis is interested in constructions of religion and of religious identity in the diaspora, specifically the making of Vietnamese Buddhism in Montreal, Québec. It both attempts to understand Vietnamese Buddhism in Montreal as constructed by those who experience it, and religion's role in the creation of a Canadian and Vietnamese identity. How is Vietnamese Buddhism lived in Montreal? In what ways does Buddhism shape Vietnamese-Canadians' interactions? How might Buddhism play into marking them as different?

Abstract

This thesis is a study of religion in movement through retellings of stories from members of the Vietnamese-Canadian immigrant community in Montreal, Québec. It aims to demonstrate that religion, specifically Buddhism, plays an important role in processes of homemaking. The thesis maps Vietnamese Buddhism as a complex system of shifting beliefs and practices, highly contingent on its encounters with different environments and people. It aims to show that the tradition is strongly anchored in members of the community's everyday life given that it is tightly intertwined with cultural ways to interact, eat, care, and treat their family members, alive and dead.

This thesis, following North American Religions scholars, aims to challenge the assumption that the modern world, due to its post-Enlightenment disenchantment with the superstitious in the move toward the rational and scientific, has been “secularized,” that is, emptied of religion, which has declined and become privatized. It argues that religion still has much to do with the way everyday life is lived. The research thus takes up a “lived religion” approach to enquire into the ordinary religious subject's everyday practices in new, often non-religious, and profane spaces, rather than the explicit and exclusive religious life of the unambiguously religious individual. It aims to demonstrate that studying religion constitutes a generative avenue to understanding societies today.

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INTRODUCTION

Religions, as Thomas Tweed argued, are crucial to processes of dwelling, or homemaking, which entail “mapping, building, and inhabiting” a given space.¹ Studying religion thus constitutes a generative avenue to understanding how immigrant communities adopt, shape, and transform their new environment to make it home. In a new country, immigrant religious institutions build spaces for members of a group to gather, speak their language, eat their foods, and express their emotions in their own cultural register, thereby allowing for a connection to the homeland to be sustained and transmitted. Religions might also outline a culturally specific system of values and norms, which serves to inform members of the immigrant community’s behaviours and to mark them as a distinct collective. This thesis is interested in constructions of religion and religious identity in the diaspora, specifically the making of Vietnamese Buddhism in Montreal, Québec. It has the dual purpose of attempting to understand Vietnamese Buddhism in Montreal as constructed by those who experience it, and religion’s role in the creation of a Canadian and Vietnamese identity. How is Vietnamese Buddhism lived in Montreal? In what ways does Buddhism shape Vietnamese-Canadians’ interactions? How might Buddhism play into marking them as different?

To answer these questions, I opted for the study of religion in movement. My study thus examined religion as migrating from one country to another, as shaping behaviours and attitudes across generations and age, as well as transcending public and private spheres of everyday life.

¹ Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 82.

My investigation was multisited to best reflect a variety of perspectives and ways of being Vietnamese, Québécois, and Canadian. The data was collected over a period of five months (August to December 2022) and included participant observation in a local temple, Chùa Quán Âm in Montreal's Côte-des-Neiges neighbourhood, and 18 semi-structured interviews with 20 participants aged between 18 and 80 years old. In that time, I followed regular volunteers, five women we will meet in Chapter One, in and out of the temple's kitchen, into prayer rooms, cafeterias, and gardens to appropriately care for the various entities populating the temple. I cooked, ate, cleaned, gossiped, and fed Buddhas, saints, monastics, and spirits with them. I met with interlocutors in coffeeshops or in their homes and talked about their Buddhist practice and knowledge (Chapter Two) over shared pastries and cups of tea. More often than not, my interviewees sent me home with food to sample and share with my own family.

As an outsider to the community, building trust with my interlocutors proved to be a long and arduous process. Directly asking members of the Vietnamese community to tell me about their religious beliefs and everyday Buddhist practice was not as conducive to generative conversation as I had hoped. Most of those I approached in fact were reticent to speak with me about Buddhism and sometimes declined, claiming that they were not "Buddhist enough" to provide me with the information I was looking for. I needed to find "a common language"² to communicate with them and foster closer relationships before broaching the topic of religion. Given that I wanted to understand how Vietnamese Buddhism was lived, I reoriented my enquiry to focus on Vietnameseness, the quality of being Vietnamese in everyday life or culture.

² E. N. Anderson, *Everyone Eats: Understanding Food and Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 2.

Approaching Vietnamese-ness through food proved most fruitful. My interlocutors explained that food was central in Vietnamese culture. They lit up as they told me about their favourite home-cooked traditional Vietnamese dishes. They expressed longing for food cooked the way their mothers did, stressed that food had to be offered to guests as they entered their house, and insisted it was gifted to show love. Some also told me that food was pivotal in their immigration and integration experience: they spoke of the alienation they felt at school when their food smelled or looked funny to other children, explained that adaptation to Western foods and ways of eating helped them fit in, and cooked traditional dishes to preserve the Vietnamese part of their identity.

Talking about food, which was so deeply embedded in day-to-day life, revealed much about my interlocutors, including their experience of Buddhism. It sparked memories of going to *chùa* to make offerings, hanging out with cousins and family, and most importantly partaking in the vegetarian meal served after the service. My interlocutors emphasized the importance of memorializing and caring for the dead in Vietnamese culture. Properly feeding and feasting with them was essential. As will be discussed in Chapter Three, food was most revealing of cultural and, by extension, religious norms.

The remaining sections of the introduction provide a discussion of the theory informing this research, some context surrounding the community under study and Vietnamese Buddhism in the diaspora, as well as a short description of the research sample.

STUDYING RELIGION-AS-LIVED: EVERYDAY BUDDHISMS

This thesis, following North American Religions scholars (see Bender 2003, and Ammerman 2014), aims to challenge the assumption that the modern world, due to its post-Enlightenment disenchantment with the superstitious in the move toward the rational and scientific, has been

“secularized,” that is, emptied of religion, which has declined and become privatized (Casanova 2012, 2013; Taylor 2007). Contrary to popular belief, despite lower attendance in places of worship, religion is not disappearing, nor is it heading in that direction, but continues to affect daily interactions and ways of life. This thesis argues that religion has much to do with the way “secular” activities and daily interactions are carried out. To demonstrate this, it identifies ways in which religion, specifically Vietnamese Buddhism, remains deeply intertwined with everyday life.

A “lived religion” approach, pioneered by sociologists and anthropologists of North American Religions who grew dissatisfied with the way religion was studied within their discipline, is best suited to serve this purpose (Orsi 1999; McGuire 2008; Ammerman 2014; Hall 2021). Lived religion scholars hold that the study of religion has traditionally been centered on inquiries and assumptions that inhibit full representation of religious experience. As David Hall states, there was a realization that, “while we know a great deal about the history of theology and (say) church and state, we know next-to-nothing about religion as practiced and precious little about the everyday thinking and doing of lay men and women.”³ “Lived religion” thus first developed as a project to tackle the investigation of the everyday practice of the ordinary religious subject. It was meant to unsettle and rethink “what constitutes religion,” and especially assumed binaries contained within its definition and study. Hall further notes that scholars of lived religion have criticized and countered mainstream distinctions between popular/elite,

³ David D. Hall, *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), vii.

profane/sacred or high/low religion by paying close attention to the ways in which assumed distinctions are disregarded in practice.

Lived religion approaches also counter, as Robert Orsi explained, Protestant definitions of religion, which marked it as “private and interior,” “intellectually consistent and reasonable, not ambivalent and contradictory,” as a transcendent matter of choice.⁴ Lived religion goes against religion defined as such and seeks to illuminate the “contradictions and inconsistencies” of everyday religious practices. Lived religion, as Meredith McGuire argues, aims to fundamentally rethink common conceptualizations of religion and how we study it, but with a focus on decentering the study of religion from “institutionally defined beliefs and practices,” and recentering it on “the actual experiences of religious persons,” specifically practices.⁵ An attention to practices prompts the scholar to engage with the “complexities, apparent inconsistencies, heterogeneity, and untidiness of the range of religious practices” that are truly useful to people and shape the way they think and act.⁶

Rather than investigating the explicit and exclusive religious life of the unambiguously religious individual, my research thus enquires into the ordinary religious subject’s everyday practices in new, often non-religious, and profane spaces. The subsequent chapters aim to show that Vietnamese-Canadians in Montreal, whether highly involved at local pagodas and in meditation practices or self-labelled as non-Buddhist, carry Buddhist teachings into their daily

⁴ Robert Orsi, “Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion,” in *Lived Religion in America*, by David D. Hall (ed.), 11.

⁵ Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

activities and interactions, and allow for doctrine, often indistinguishable from culture, to inform their conceptions of the world, and their identity.

This work also inserts itself into a recent trend in Buddhist studies, which surveys how Buddhisms are practiced locally.⁷ Jeffrey Samuels (2010) explains that, in the late 1980's and 90's, some Buddhist Studies scholars, notably Gregory Schopen (1991), Charles Hallisey (1995), and Philip Almond (1988), started to critique conventional constructions of Buddhism in the academy and called for an investigation of "other, nonclassical sources."⁸ Samuels takes up those scholars' critiques and closely examines social relationships and emotion to explain how they shape and sustain the Buddhist institution in contemporary Sri Lanka. Samuels also cites Donald Lopez's more recent edited volume *Buddhism in Practice* (2015) to illustrate this shift to new sources. In his introduction, Lopez ponders whether "Buddhism" would be "better rendered in the plural," despite obvious parallels between Buddhism in different localities, "to be accounted for in large part by a constant retrospection to the figure of the Buddha."⁹ Robert Campany (2012) echoes this thought: "In the case of a large, complex, mobile tradition such as Buddhism, whether we view it synchronically or diachronically, it is always a matter of plural Buddhisms united not by a common 'essence' but by a certain family resemblance of clusters of repertoire elements."¹⁰ Jacqueline Stone, building on Campany's view, treats Buddhism as a

⁷ Jeffrey Samuels, *Attracting the Heart: Social Relations and the Aesthetic of Emotion in Sri Lankan Monastic Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010), xxvi.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Donald Lopez, "Introduction" in *Buddhism in Practice*, ed. by Donald S. Lopez (Princeton, Princeton UP, 2015), 3.

¹⁰ Robert Campany, *Signs from the Unseen Realm: Buddhist Miracle Tales from Early Modern China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012), 30. (Cited in Stone (2016), p. 5.)

“shifting repertoire of resources,” rather than as an ahistorical, set entity. Stone’s repertoire is “one with porous boundaries,” interpreted and used by various individuals in in varying ways, permeable to external influences and open to alteration and development.¹¹

As Stone notes, the most salient implication of viewing Buddhism as a repertoire of resources is that it allows for various conflicting and competing logics to simultaneously inform the lives of the people she studies. Stone’s work on death and death rites in medieval Japan often sheds light on what have traditionally been viewed as “inconsistencies and fracture lines” in Buddhist discourse.¹² In *The Buddhist Dead* (2007), Stone and Cuevas explain that the centrality of Buddhism in dealing with death and the dead has not been reflected in scholarship on Buddhism, given the 19th century shift to portraying Buddhism as a rational and scientific system of thought, and to an irreconcilability with the doctrine of non-self, or *anātman* (Skt.), denying the existence of a permanent soul. In Buddhist Studies, they explain, *anātman* came to be viewed as an “all-encompassing, normative measure of everything claiming to be ‘Buddhist,’” and has structured enquiries in a way that placed Buddhist soteriology as orthodox and non-conforming, on-the-ground death practices and beliefs as inconsistent, or secondary at best.¹³ Stone and Cuevas encourage Buddhist Studies scholars to “break free of the assumption that one

¹¹ Jacqueline I. Stone, *Right Thoughts at the Last Moment: Buddhism and Deathbed Practices in Early Medieval Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2016), 4-5.

¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

¹³ Bryan J. Cuevas, and Jacqueline Stone, “Introduction” in *The Buddhist Dead: Practices Discourses, Representations*, ed. by Cuevas and Stone (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007), 6.

pole [no-self] should be understood as ‘normative’ (thus casting the other [continuity of the deceased] in a problematic light),” so that Buddhist death and dying can be properly understood.

This thesis takes up Stone’s idea of a shifting repertoire of Buddhist practices and beliefs, and Lopez’s call for the study of a Buddhism that is multiple, of Buddhisms, to account for the presence of the tradition under varying forms in the Vietnamese community in Montreal. It will refrain from attempting to bridge perceived tensions between my interlocutors’ practices and beliefs, and Buddhist soteriology. Relying on my interlocutors’ accounts, I will take the importance of familial and social ties, and their concern for providing proper care to their dead as essential components of their Vietnamese Buddhism. The thesis is concerned with how death is lived on the ground and, to this end, counters rationalizing trends in academic study by engaging with the “superstitious,” in this case the continuity of the *ātman* after death. In her analysis of burial rites through *muzhiming* (tomb inscriptions) in late medieval China, Jessey J. C. Choo explains that a modern rational reader, due to the assumptions of her time, would view the inscriptions as reflective of the interests of the living, rather than the dead. The modern reader would ascribe the dead’s voices to the living: “To us, there were no speaking dead, only speakers for the dead.”¹⁴ Choo however emphasizes that the dead were important actors in the way matters of this world were carried out. She writes, “To the people living then, the dead really did speak to them, and often.”¹⁵ I would argue that this is still true for my interlocutors of East Asian origin today: ghosts and spirits were very much part of everyday life. For my interlocutors, as for the living in late medieval China, the dead had agency. Throughout this work, following Choo, I

¹⁴ Ibid., 195.

¹⁵ Jessey J. C. Choo, *Inscribing Death: Burials, Representations and Remembrance in Tang China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2022), 194.

strive to render the dead as speaking, and as integral to the shaping of Vietnamese Buddhism in Canada.

VIETNAMESE-CANADIANS IN MONTREAL: BACKGROUND ON THE POPULATION UNDER STUDY

THE VIETNAMESE COMMUNITY IN MONTREAL

The Vietnamese community in Québec was largely shaped by four immigration waves. The first Vietnamese in Québec were university students who arrived in the 1950's (around 1500 in Canada, 1100 in Québec).¹⁶ The second wave of Vietnamese immigrants took place between 1975 (fall of Saigon, now Ho Chi Minh City) and 1978. These were political refugees (7,770, 65% in Québec) who were fleeing the Communist take-over of the South. The third wave happened between the late 1970's and early 1980's, after the reunification of Communist North Vietnam and American-backed South Vietnam. The new government imposed strict constraints on religious and political freedoms throughout the country, redistributed confiscated land, and sent people with ties to the French or Americans to re-education/labour camps.¹⁷ Given the intolerable circumstances and the rising poverty in the country, many were forced to flee. They set sail on small, overcrowded, and unsafe fishing boats, hoping to reach refugee camps in

¹⁶ Louis-Jacques Dorais, "Les identités vietnamiennes au Québec," *Recherches sociographiques* 45, no. 1 (2004): 62.

¹⁷ Alexander Soucy, "Thầy Phổ Tịnh: A Vietnamese Nun's Struggles in Canada," in *Flowers on the Rock: Global and Local Buddhisms in Canada*, by Victor Sogen Hori, John S. Harding, and Alexander Soucy (eds) (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 335.

Malaysia, Indonesia, or Thailand to then immigrate to the West.¹⁸ The West labelled them *boatpeople*.

From 1979 to 1981, Canada took in 53,651 Vietnamese (half of whom were of Chinese descent), and 12,000 of them settled in Québec. The fourth wave of Vietnamese immigration took place in 1982 and was mainly due to family reunification programs. Since then, economic Vietnamese immigration has carried on. In 2016, the Canadian population census reported that 240,615 people identified themselves as of Vietnamese origin, with almost 20% of them living in the province of Québec, mostly in Montreal.

Pagodas played an important role in processes of adaptation and homemaking of Vietnamese immigrants in Canadian society (Rutledge 1985; Dorais 1993; Soucy 2013). They provided a space where the community could gather, speak their language, eat their foods, and partake in cultural practices together. Pagodas, in addition to providing religious services, also acted as community centers. Most of them were “concerned with the preservation and transmission of Vietnamese culture, especially with regards to moral and ceremonial aspects.”¹⁹ They organized youth groups, social performances, and language courses.²⁰ Institutional religion, therefore, was fundamental to constructing Vietnamese-Canadian collective ethnic and cultural identity.

¹⁸ Ibid., 336.

¹⁹ Louis-Jacques Dorais et Éric Richard, *Les Vietnamiens de Montréal* (Montréal : Les Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 2007), 88.

²⁰ Soucy, “Outpost Buddhism: Vietnamese Buddhists in Halifax,” *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies*, no. 9 (2013):112.

STUDYING VIETNAMESE BUDDHISM IN CANADA

Vietnamese Buddhism was brought to Montreal by Vietnamese immigrants. The first religious associations in the city were created and largely shaped by refugees in the late 1970's and 80's, following the forcible reunification of Communist North Vietnam and American-backed South Vietnam in 1976. With time, the mostly lay population came to purchase and build spaces for the Vietnamese Buddhist community, as well as sponsor monastics from Vietnam.²¹ Pagodas in Montreal follow the Pure Land tradition, which mainly teaches that chanting the name of the Buddha Amitabha, A Di Đà Phật in Vietnamese, will bring about rebirth in his realm and eventual Enlightenment, that is, release from saṃsāra. “By chanting the Buddha’s name, you are planting the seed of Enlightenment in your mind,” a monk at Chùa Quán Âm had told me. Sunday services are devoted to performing the rites to ensure favourable rebirth of the recently deceased and to commemorating the dead. The large number of pagodas in Montreal are therefore not due to differences in practice, but to disagreements and divisions arising from power struggles and regional differences among Buddhists from the North and South.²²

For most Vietnamese, Alec Soucy claims, “religion is lived rather than experienced intellectually,”²³ and therefore most often consists in praying to Buddhas, chanting sutras, offering incense to bodhisattvas and ancestors, and I would add, living out the teachings in everyday life. In Vietnam, one of my interlocutors who had recently immigrated to Canada told

²¹ Soucy, “Thầy Phổ Tịnh” in *Flowers on the Rock*, 336.

²² *Ibid.*, 337.

²³ Soucy, *The Buddha Side: Gender, Power and Buddhist Practice in Vietnam* (Honolulu: University Of Hawai'i Press, 2012), 16.

me, Buddhism is a “lifestyle.” Vietnamese Buddhism is not simply about going to the temple, “it’s in your everyday... life. It’s how people live, and construct houses [according to *phong thủy*/Chinese geomancy] and marry [according to Zodiac signs].” Vietnamese Buddhism is thus by definition closely tied to mundane and profane daily activities, rather than restricted to the sacred, which would most commonly be considered “religion.” A careful study of Vietnamese Buddhism should therefore resist viewing its object through the lens of traditional distinctions outlined in the theory section. Given that formal ritual is, as noted above, inseparable from “secular” activities, accurately writing about Vietnamese Buddhism should refrain from drawing boundaries between what constitutes formal ritual, or the “religious,” and the “cultural” of everyday life.²⁴

My informant also explained that in Canada, Buddhism had become a “practice” restricted to attendance at Sunday services because Vietnamese-Canadians had to adapt to “whatever [the dominant religion] you have here,” thereby highlighting how processes of migration and homemaking had dramatically altered the Buddhism that she knew. Pointing to the differences between Vietnamese and Vietnamese-Canadian culture, she concluded that here, “life is not centered around it [Buddhism].” As Victor Hori notes, Buddhism has a history of spreading and being implanted in regions outside its birth place: “there is no such thing as Buddhism undistorted by culture.”²⁵ In Canada, services came to be held on Sunday mornings

²⁴ Julia Cassaniti, *Living Buddhism: Mind, Self, and Emotion in a Thai Community* (Cornell University Press, 2015), 181.

²⁵ Victor Sogen Hori, “How Do We Study Buddhism in Canada?” in *Wild Geese: Buddhism in Canada* V. S. Hori, J. S. Harding, and A. D. Soucy (eds) (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010), 22.

rather than several times during week days because Vietnamese-Canadians had to respect the 9 to 5, Monday to Friday work schedule, as well as to give the appearance of similarity to traditionally Catholic Québécois society. As a result, Soucy writes, “In the diaspora, practice becomes equated with reciting sutras on Sundays,” and temples are “generally not accessible for individuals to simply make offerings.”²⁶ Practice in Canada thus became communal and demanded a high level of commitment. As Soucy explained, restricting Buddhism to Sunday morning pagoda services had the effect of widening “the gap between the sacred and the profane in their [Vietnamese-Canadians’] lives.”²⁷

I would further hold that the religious context in Québec, and especially in its urban centres, at the time and today also contributed to widening this gap. Until 1960, Catholicism had been an omnipresent and pervasive force working closely with the government, operating in all spheres of life (Ferretti 1999; Linteau-Durocher-Robert 1989; Lamonde 2004). The Vietnamese immigrants arrived at a time where Québécois were rising against the dominance of religious institutions in “secular” matters, such as education, healthcare, social welfare programs, and politics.²⁸ In Montreal, people were demanding the removal of the religious from the public

²⁶ Soucy, “Outpost Buddhism,” 112.

²⁷ Soucy, “The Dynamics of Change in An Exiled Pagoda: Vietnamese Buddhism in Montreal,” *Canberra Anthropology* 19, no. 2 (1996): 2.

²⁸ At the forefront of this movement were Québécois intellectuals. One of the most celebrated works questioning the role of the Church in the State was *Refus Global*, a manifesto by a collective of 16 individuals from Québec’s artistic “Automatistes” community. Heavily critiquing educational institutions, *Refus Global* states: “Heirs of papal authority, mechanical, brooking no opposition, past masters of obscurantist methods, our educational institutions had, from that time on, absolute control over a world of warped memories, stagnant minds and

sphere in favour of the establishment of a *laïc* state (Linteau-Durocher-Robert-Ricard 1989). Living in accordance with the climate at the time thereby avoiding animosity with the host population and facilitating integration would have demanded efforts at containing the religious within the private.

As my research will show, however, although affiliation with conventional Buddhist institutions and overt displays of Buddhist practice and identity are less common among those who have been raised in Québec and retain less of a connection with the homeland, Vietnamese culture and identity in Montreal remain tightly intertwined with Vietnamese Buddhism.

My Interlocutors: Vietnamese, but not all Buddhist

About a third of the people I approached for interviews were hesitant to call themselves Buddhists, and, as mentioned above, at first declined to speak with me. They worried that their Buddhist background and what they described as minimal exposure to the tradition (e.g., performance of Buddhist rites for the dead, taking part in celebrations such as *Têt* and memorial ceremonies) would not be sufficient to adequately inform my research. As lived religions theorists point out, an apparent lack of “religion” under its common forms, that is, affiliation with recognized institutions and formal or committed devotion, is not an indicator of its absence. Rather, it means that the religious has morphed and appears in different places and under

misguided intentions.” (see *Refus Global Manifesto*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/refus-global-manifesto>).

different forms. To understand Vietnamese Buddhism in Montreal, I thus set out to understand how the religious was practiced, rather than focus on how religious my interlocutors were.²⁹

My interviewees were of three different generations: 1, 1.5, and 2. Generation 1 were the Vietnamese who immigrated to Canada after having spent most of their adult life in Vietnam. They were aged between 65 to 80 years old and were mostly comfortable calling themselves Buddhists. They detailed with confidence how Buddhism affected their day-to-day life and how it informed key aspects of Vietnamese culture and identity. Generation 1.5 included Vietnamese immigrants who were born in Vietnam, but moved to Canada at age 18 or younger, and often experienced life, and school systems, both in Vietnam and in Canada. They were aged between 37 and 64 years old. Finally, Generation 2 were Vietnamese-Canadians who were born in Canada, aged between 18 and 36 years old. Most of my generations 1.5 and 2 interlocutors were hesitant to call themselves Buddhists.

ASSEMBLING INDIVIDUAL STORIES AS METHOD

“Storytelling allows us to lay our narratives next to one another in order to witness how our experiences are both interconnected and distinct. It is precisely in such exchanges that bonds are built and affirmed and how our communities can strive and dream alongside one another.” – Martin Nguyen, Fairfield University

I made the choice to deep dive into conversations with a few individuals to better illuminate how individual storytelling, or experiences, are reflective of shared realities and contribute to constructing collective identity. As the following chapters will show, patterns emerged in

²⁹ Courtney Bender, *Heaven's Kitchen: Living Religion at God's Love We Deliver* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

interlocutors' narratives that together create a collective, but nonetheless specific, sense of being Vietnamese and (somewhat) Buddhist in Montreal. By telling the stories my interlocutors entrusted me with, I also aimed to draw the reader in, to engage them in conversation with us. The goal was to achieve a shared sense of intimacy and to foster better understanding between all parties involved. After all, "Storytelling is never a solitary act. Rather, it is a communal act of disclosure with an invitational valence."³⁰

Lisa Stevenson writes that "Images, like stories, resist explanation and therefore resist the demand for objectivity that is caught up in the question of replicability," which is essential to the production of "facts," or truth in the social sciences.³¹ Citing Lucien Taylor, who claimed anthropology was "iconophobic," she explains that, given that images are up to interpretation, they escape our discursive control and attribution of fixed meaning.³² Stevenson proposes "an anthropology through the image," where "the truth of the possible," rather than "the actual" is presented.³³ I view the stories I collected as instances of Stevenson's images that refuse to be pinned down, to be made definitive. No single story is representative of Vietnamese Buddhism, and all stories are unique, non-replicable. Stories are filtered through doubt and interpretation, on both the sides of their teller and the anthropologist, which multiplies the meanings they might

³⁰ Martin Nguyen, "Telling a Story of Death and its Disclosure," *The Immanent Frame* SSRC, 2023, <https://tif.ssrc.org/2023/04/05/telling-a-story-of-death-and-its-disclosures/>.

³¹ Lisa Stevenson, *Life Beside Itself: Imagining Care in the Canadian Arctic* (Oakland, California: University of California Press), 2014, 14.

³² *Ibid.*, 11.

³³ *Ibid.*, 14.

take. I hope the stories in this thesis serve to convey a Buddhism that is living and lived, one that is multiple, incomplete, and growing.

As mentioned earlier, my interlocutors were “ordinary” and at times ambiguously religious Vietnamese-Québécois. My interest in speaking to “non-experts” in matters of religion and culture was guided by the recent move away from key informants in anthropology. Alec Soucy explains that anthropology has often focused on ritual to uncover its essentialized meaning, and thus “has privileged the discourses of those who are more articulate in describing (and ascribing) ritual meaning” and who “have a vested interest in providing the anthropologist with ‘deep’ explanations of ritual symbolism.”³⁴ Religious specialists, often male and learned, themselves partaking in and negotiating power dynamics affecting their views and speech, thus become the measure for right belief and practice. A move away from key informants sheds light on other existing perspectives, and extends the production of religion to people and sites that were not considered before.

My interlocutors were resilient, kind, highly introspective, and community-oriented persons. I hope that the stories I included reflect this, and that they allow the reader to connect with these individuals the way I did. By including a variety of voices in this work, big and small, young and old, poetic and “knowledgeable” or not, I hope to have given a taste of what it can mean to be Vietnamese, Buddhist, Québécois, and Canadian in Montreal.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

³⁴ Soucy, “The Problem with Key Informants,” *Anthropological Forum* 10, no. 2 (2010): 181-2.

The body of this thesis has three chapters. Chapter One is a retelling of a single Sunday, where I, as per usual, followed five regular volunteers at Chùa Quán Âm. The aim of this chapter is to draw importance to the voices of the women who, operating from the kitchen, perform the domestic work at the temple. The chapter highlights that their presence as the ones who cook, clean and feed is essential to the sustenance of the pagoda, and integral to the production of a Vietnamese Buddhism in Montreal. Chapter Two and Three are informed by my interviews. Chapter Two takes everyday religion as its object of analysis and demonstrates that daily ways of being reflect Buddhist teachings and are constitutive of the tradition on the ground. Chapter Three dives deeper into my interlocutors' allusions to and interactions with food. It aims to show that the way food is handled is highly revealing of cultural ways of being Vietnamese and, therefore, in many ways Buddhist.

CHAPTER ONE – CHÙA QUÁN ÂM: THE PAGODA

Accurately documenting Vietnamese, immigrant Buddhism(s) in Montreal, constructed under varying conditions and pressures, demanded a multisited study. The sites I investigated included informants of different genders, age, involvement with religion, and generations of immigrants, but also different physical spaces. In this thesis, I resist tendencies to associate the religious with the sacred, advocate for the presence of religion in the profane, and therefore largely focus on non-institutional, everyday Buddhism. I however hold that sacred, religious institutional spaces contain understudied spaces associated with the profane and peopled by understudied Buddhists. As Nancy Ammerman wrote, the work of religion-as-lived should be “organized around the domains of life where sacred things are being produced, encountered, and shared,” rather than confined to all-or-nothing, either sacred or secular spaces.³⁵ Lived religion should attempt to locate the religious beyond official theology, and organizations, and formal memberships by exploring “material, embodied aspects of religion.”³⁶ But as we will see, this can take place within religious organizations too.

I thus proceed to an exploration of the Buddhism produced through the domestic labour of lay, female volunteers who inhabit the kitchen at Chùa Quán Âm—a space traditionally regarded as profane, female, and therefore largely disregarded in the study of religion—where meals are prepared and carried out to feed the living and the dead. This chapter relates my

³⁵ Nancy Ammerman, “Finding Religion in Everyday Life,” *Sociology of Religion* 75, no. 2 (2014): 92.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

interactions on a single Sunday with five regular volunteers at the pagoda: Cô L, Cô P, Cô T, Cô M, and Cô F. Through retellings of our conversations, I demonstrate that the production of Buddhist knowledge takes place among those who undertake seemingly non-religious activities at the temple and occupy profane, in-between space. I aim to draw attention to the importance of their views and activities to shaping and sustaining Vietnamese Buddhism in Montreal.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

This chapter most notably draws inspiration from three lived religion books: Joshua Dubler's *Down in the Chapel: Religious Life in an American Prison* (2014), Jessica Starling's *Guardians of the Buddha's Home: Domestic Religion in Contemporary Jodo Shinshu* (2019), and Elizabeth Pérez's *Religion in the Kitchen: Cooking, Talking, and the Making of Black Atlantic Traditions* (2016). This section is dedicated to explaining how these works inform my own.

Down in the Chapel: Religious Life in an American Prison tells the story of a single week's time spent at Graterford prison's chapel to reflect on how daily interactions shape "doing time and doing religion in contemporary America."³⁷ Dubler uses dialogue with and in-depth characterization of roughly 20 individuals to showcase how the religious is lived out and constituted, in the chapel. The book also highlights the presence of multiple religious traditions and details how they encounter each other and coexist within a shared space. Dubler is careful not to essentialize the traditions by generalizing the words of a few, but rather aims to demonstrate the plurality of religious experience and manifestations by piecing together their adherents' conversation bits. In reading through everyday talk and gossip exchanged between

³⁷ Joshua Dubler, *Down in the Chapel: Religious Life in an American Prison*, First edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 12.

Dubler and his interlocutors, one seamlessly comes to understand the dynamics between men of various faiths with different values and views. This chapter borrows the book's structure and details encounters and conversations on a single day spent at Chùa Quán Âm, with in-depth exploration of the activities and speech of a limited number of informants. The chapter aims to provide the same fluid and malleable quality to religion as Dubler does. Recording various perspectives and leading readers to gradually string both eclectic and parallel beliefs together, I hope, allows for an organic composition of Vietnamese Buddhism(s) to emerge. The Vietnamese Buddhism I highlight is multiple and comprised of diverse ways of thinking that inform conversations and activities in a given space.

Starling's book investigates the world of Japanese temple wives, *bōmori*. The book enquires into "domestic religion," where the sacred/profane binary is bridged by those women, at once wives, mothers and even priests, who float from main halls to dining rooms, guest-receiving rooms, and kitchens. Starling establishes that domesticity, often related to feminized spaces and forms of labour, is a potent means to perform religion.³⁸ My work similarly aims to valorize the perspectives and theology of those who, in an institutional setting, are more closely associated with domestic labour rather than the sacred. My research takes up two of her driving questions: What does Buddhism look like if men do not occupy center stage? And, more bluntly, "What are the women doing?"³⁹ Starling's book shifts the "centers of gravity" by zooming into what goes on in lay, domestic, and female spheres of being, and by demonstrating how crucial the latter are to sustaining and producing what is viewed as sacred space, to caring for the

³⁸ Jessica Starling, *Guardians of the Buddha's Home: Domestic Religion in Contemporary Jōdo Shinshū* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2019), 155.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

Buddha's home. This chapter thus takes as key informants five lay women and follows them out of Chùa Quán Âm's kitchen, behind the counters where they sell traditional Vietnamese dishes, into the cafeteria area where monastics and families with deceased relatives enjoy their meals, up the stairs in the prayer room and into the adjacent room for the dead, and down the stairs, back into the kitchen. As Starling notes, "most scholars of Buddhism would have been content with the master's account of things,"⁴⁰ but as she does, this chapter attempts to illuminate how women, feminized labour and space might enrich those accounts.

Pérez's *Religion in the Kitchen* holds that Black Atlantic traditions are made through food. The book explores ritual food preparation in priest Ashabi Mosely's Ilé Laroye Lucumi community's kitchen and how "meaningless" talk such as individual retellings of initiation stories while cooking represents a "common act of self-definition."⁴¹ Pérez focuses her study on how narratives about how Lucumi came to claim its adherents acclimates new members to thinking, acting, and speaking within religious "interpretative frames of reference."⁴² "Seemingly trivial" activities taking place in the kitchen, such as cooking or conversation, are therefore shown to be central to constructing religious self-, and collective identity.⁴³ Kitchenspaces, and the activities performed within them, are in this way sacralised given their importance to the constitution of the religious community. This chapter also pays close attention to what happens in kitchens and to the activities involving food and explains how they come to sustain the pagoda

⁴⁰ Ibid., 56.

⁴¹ Elizabeth Pérez, *Religion in the Kitchen: Cooking, Talking and the Making of Black Atlantic Traditions* (New York: NYU Press, 2016), 2.

⁴² Ibid., 166-7.

⁴³ Ibid., 2.

and those who people it. At Chùa Quán Âm, just like in Ashabi's kitchen, a group mostly made of women prepared the meals and "controlled the 'food axis,' the space of food preparation, storage, consumption, and elimination."⁴⁴ This chapter highlights women working in the kitchen's important role in producing and transmitting religion.

This chapter does not frame kitchens and kitchen work as sites of opposition and resistance to a male-dominated religious institution. Instead, also building on Pérez's theory, it seeks to illuminate how the act of feeding is in and of itself crucial to the construction of Vietnamese Buddhism. As Pérez importantly notes, "It has been assumed that women are cosmologically subordinate if they fulfill roles customarily associated to them."⁴⁵ But kitchenwork does not necessarily perpetuate women's subordination. For her informants, it rather constitutes a valid and potent avenue to perform religious identity, as well as to foster the "specialized skills required for the transmission of Lucumi traditions to succeeding generations."⁴⁶ As we will see, feeding, central to my interlocutors' work at *chua*, ensured the maintenance of proper tradition and social ties necessary to the survival of the temple, Buddhism, and Vietnamese culture and community.

SUNDAY SERVICE AT CHÙA QUÁN ÂM

⁴⁴ Ibid., 111.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 85.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 123.

This morning is⁴⁷ Sunday service at Chùa Quán Âm, where prayers will be chanted for the recently deceased. It also happens to be the 100th day following the master's mother's passing. Dozens of congregants make their way down Avenue de Courtrai, first coming across the familiar martial arts gym, then the Islamic community center, before reaching the pagoda's imposing metallic gates. They walk along the row of heavy stone lions, though now defaced, still proudly standing atop their ornamented pillars and dutifully guarding the entrance. Two years ago, Cô L had told me, a man had come at night and violently attacked the statues with a club. Several other acts of vandalism perpetrated against Vietnamese pagodas across the city had followed. The attacks were thought to be linked to COVID-19-related anti-Asian hate crimes. "Lions are described in sutras as sacred animals," Cô L explained. "In the olden days, they were the strongest."

At the opening in the gate, congregants make a left turn and step into the front garden, which usually peacefully harbours flowers blooming amid lush greenery as slow ripples break the surface of the artificial pond to the light flutter of butterfly wings and the soft singing of birds. On this day, the garden has turned into a bustling hive of activity. Newcomers weave through groups absorbed in animated conversation and gleefully shrieking children chasing one another, to pay their respects to *bồ tát* (bodhisattva) Quán Âm. Known as Guanyin in China,

⁴⁷ The use of the present tense in my retelling serves to draw the reader in, to get them to see and feel what the anthropologist saw and felt on that day. The present tense also provides a timeless quality to the story, indicating that much of what happened that Sunday would reoccur the following, and probably took place the previous, week. Furthermore, for the Vietnamese, situating themselves in time is not primary: verb tenses do not exist in the Vietnamese language. Using the present tense to tell the story therefore allows me to refrain from drawing sharp distinctions between what happened in the past, in the present, and in the future, and in that way allows for continuity with Vietnamese culture.

Quán Âm is the Vietnamese representation of the bodhisattva of Compassion, Avalokiteśvara. While Avalokiteśvara is depicted as male or gender neutral, Quán Âm and Guanyin, common in East Asia, have adopted a female form. At the pagoda, Quán Âm was often described to me as a mother who hears, sees, and answers all. My interlocutors often compared her to the Virgin Mary. She is the patron saint of mothers and seamen, closely associated with compassion, mercy, or protection, as well as fertility. Standing on a lotus flower springing out of rocks in the pond, the glistening white Quán Âm magnanimously towers over the garden, holding in her left hand a sacred water vase turned upside down, indicating that she is actively purifying the world and relieving suffering. A gentle expression on her rounded face, chin slightly tucked in and eyes closed, she nonjudgmentally welcomes devotees to the pagoda. Many view her as a model for everyday behaviour. “Always lucid, never to intervene rashly,” Cô L had told me. Quán Âm reminds her to let go of grudges and remorse: “Do not keep [those things] in your heart.”

Following the beige stoned path further down the garden takes us to the main building’s front doors. Inside are steps that lead to the main room, which serves as a cafeteria. I head to the kitchen to my left to find Cô L. Cô P calls out my name from the other side of the room, by the stairs leading up to the prayer room, a heavy-looking tray filled with small bowls of red bean soup resting on her forearms. I rush to meet her, take my shoes off, grab the tray, and follow her up the carpeted stairs lined with sutras.

~Cô P

When her father passed away, Cô P performed the rites for 49 days at Chùa Quán Âm. This is when she started to get much more involved at the pagoda. She used to attend Chùa Huyen Hong where her father’s remains are kept, but *duyên*, affinity, brought her here.

According to Cô P, when one does good things for the temple, such as volunteering, the spirits of their dead are more likely to be freed. She says that when the dead come back in our dreams, it means that they have not been able to leave. Often, they come to tell us they are hungry. She believes that it is thanks to her volunteering that her father's spirit could be released. To Cô P, karma is most important. One must do good things to accumulate good karma, which then makes it easier to let go at the moment of death, and to reach A Di Đà Phật. "If we have done bad things," Cô P had told me, "we stay in this world and we are unhappy. We are hungry, as if missing something. We are never satisfied. Never at peace." We become *cô hồn*, lonely, abandoned spirits, aimlessly wandering and grasping for a world that we refuse to leave.

At the top of the stairs is a large room, also carpeted, where various Buddhas and bodhisattvas are disposed on altars buried under exotic fruits, boxes of Ferrero rocher or Lindt chocolates, cakes, and cookies. No one I had spoken to really believed that the spirits or Buddhas ate food offered to them. Some interlocutors told me that some believe parts of the food, the vapors, could rise and be tasted. They did not seem convinced. In fact, most viewed the offering as symbols: signs of respect for the deceased, means to show compassion to help them let go and depart, or as ways to celebrate and commemorate them. One of my interviewees had explained that offering "is tradition. It comes from local customs, rather than Buddhism. Back then people would give part of what they owned [to god.esse.s]. So, in China and Vietnam, people would give rice or wheat... to show gratitude... But you know, as I was telling you, it's multidimensional. So, we offer a meal to our parents, as if they were still alive. And we hope that they will eat, but we don't think they... well—actually, maybe they do."⁴⁸ Others made offerings

⁴⁸ This interlocutor will be known as M. Vu in subsequent chapters.

because “it’s tradition. It’s out of respect for my parents,”⁴⁹ or “it’s more like a... practice to hope for things and be thankful.”⁵⁰

For some, the dead might not be able to consume the food, but they nonetheless can appreciate the gesture. Côté P explains that we offer food because “the dead are hungry. Especially those who left us precipitously [due to suicides, car accidents] ... They suffer, they hurt. They are missing the key to liberate themselves,” and acts of compassion can lessen their pain and help them let go. One of the monastics had answered:

“The explanation is, you are attached to your body, and so you see it as real.

Really real. And when you are dead, you still see yourself as real, and you will still be hungry... And, it’s a way for the child to remember their parents, to offer them uh... to pay respect to them. But it’s not just that. They are hungry. For um... they still can’t see that they’re dead. They don’t understand it, they’re grasping, they’re here. That’s why in the ceremony, you recite the sutra to persuade them that you need to go into your next reincarnation. We guide them, we recite the Buddha name, and they hold the Buddha name in their state [within themselves]. So they can achieve better uh... happier reincarnation.”

A congregant had further explained that for him,

“Buddhism is often a question of representation. Every element placed on the altar represents something. Here you see flowers. Why flowers? Because us, as humans, we associate flowers to good things. And good things, they represent

⁴⁹ This was taken from my interview with H.

⁵⁰ This comes from my interview with P.

good actions. Every time we see flowers, we are reminded that we should do good deeds [...] And, you see candles. Candles are there because they burn their whole body to shine light on things. It's as if we tried to... sacrifice ourselves to help others [...] Why is there food on the altar? Because there is no single day where we don't eat. Every day we eat. And so, similarly, we want our ancestors to eat every day, and every day we think of the ancestors. [We place food] under the Buddha because we want the Buddhist teachings to stay alive forever.”

The Vietnamese altar, echoing what Mark Rowe writes in relation to *obon* in Japan, thus reflects the variety of individual practice and interpretation and “manifests a landscape of Buddhist teachings, local practices, individual emotions, and consumer culture in a fantastically tangled montage.”⁵¹ Taking Lisa Stevenson’s “image” as the physical representation of the altar allows for several contrasting perspectives to coexist simultaneously. Tuning our anthropological investigation to what images tell us rather than words “can capture uncertainty and contradiction without having to resolve it.”⁵² Whether the various ethereal entities engaged with the food or not, we could all agree that, in the end, the physical remnants were brought back to the kitchen after the service, where they would be enjoyed by, or gifted again to, living members of the sangha.

In the room next door, rows of dead relatives’ and teachers’ pictures line the walls, stretching up from altars all the way to the ceiling. Cô P and I walk up to each altar and make our

⁵¹ Mark Rowe, “On the Road with Temple Buddhism – Interstitial Practices in Contemporary Obon,” 12 (Forthcoming).

⁵² Lisa Stevenson, *Life Beside Itself: Imagining Care in the Canadian Arctic* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2014), 10.

offerings. At Chùa Quán Âm, much like at most Vietnamese Buddhist pagodas in Québec, devotees practice Pure Land Buddhism, which mainly teaches that chanting the name of the Buddha Amitabha, A Di Đà Phật in Vietnamese, will bring about rebirth in his realm and eventual Enlightenment, that is, release from saṃsāra.⁵³ One of the head monks had told me, “A Di Đà Phật is... someone who has achieved Enlightenment... The name contains all the practices of the Buddha. You understand? So, when I say his name, already in my head, his story comes to mind. It [the name] contains all his life. That’s why the Buddha’s name, it already contains Enlightenment... When we recite it, we are storing all the karmas... negative, positive, neutral thoughts. And we accumulate [them] within. The accumulation becomes your karma that forces and pulls us toward our future... When you chant the Buddha’s name, you are planting the seed of Enlightenment in your mind.” Sunday services are, however, not dedicated to chanting for individual liberation, but rather mainly to ensure favourable rebirth of the recently deceased. Properly performing death rites, which also include offerings of food and incense, is believed to operate “merit transference,” flowing from the living to the dead, in the hope of helping them let go, and of satisfying, or pacifying, their distressed spirit.⁵⁴

I do my best to hold the tray steady as Cô P picks up each bowl, closes her eyes, and bows deeply before setting it down by each entity. We then perform three full prostrations for the Buddhas, but four for the ancestors “because they could be ours.” Cô P explains that given the

⁵³ As Alec Soucy notes in the “Buddha and the Birch Tree” (2014), Pure Land Buddhism is “primarily devotional” and largely focuses on “enlisting the aid of buddhas and bodhisattvas to lend a hand with this life and the next, and perhaps with a nod to the idea of eventual salvation through rebirth in Amitabha’s Pure Land” (380).

⁵⁴ Bryan J. Cuevas, and Jacqueline I. Stone, “Introduction” to *The Buddhist Dead: Practices, Discourses, Representations* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 6.

Buddhist belief in reincarnation, it is possible that people today were related in the past, or will be in future lives.⁵⁵ When we are done, we grab cushions, wooden stands, and sutra booklets, and we take a seat at the back, near the giant bronze bell. I am careful to bow before opening the booklet, and not to set it on the floor, as Cô P taught me. The sutras must be elevated at all times, that is, handled in a way that reflects the eminence of their contents. The sutras are transliterated from Chinese into Vietnamese, and therefore consist of strange assemblages of syllables with opaque meaning for most congregants. “The words are not important, only the sounds matter,” Cô P told me.

The ceremony begins with the call of the bell and the beating of the drum as the chanting monastics, single-filed, take place at the front of the room. Congregants, sitting cross-legged, are tightly pressed together, covering every inch of the floor. Many more are standing in the staircase while others are roaring with laughter downstairs and outside in the gardens. Children are wriggling in their mothers’ laps, an unhappy baby cries out for their parents’ attention from its portable crib. My gaze sweeps the room and sets on the imposing, seated Shakyamuni statue with his electronic halo. Amused, I cant my head to the side, staring into the mesmerizing spirals

⁵⁵ One of my interviewees, M. Vu, told me a story to this effect. He explained that the Buddha, as opposed to God, had bowed to another entity once in his last life. One day, the Buddha was walking along a path battered by recent heavy rains and mudslides. He came across an unearthed skeleton on the side of the road. The Buddha proceeded to make three prostrations to the skeleton, to his disciples’ astonishment. Perplexed, they asked him why. In M. Vu’s rendition, the Buddha answered, “Well listen, the fundamental principle in Buddhism is reincarnation and multidimensionality. So maybe this skeleton is my father’s skeleton or your father’s... we never know.” And that is why one should exhibit proper reverence to all ancestors, rather than simply one’s own. This duty is also sustained through important celebrations such as Vu Lan (Skt. Ullambana), the Ghost Festival, dedicated to celebrating and honouring all spirits and ancestors.

of orange, green, purple, red, and blue coming out of the Buddha's head. The strong wafts of incense and commanding chanting summon me back to the prayer. Cô P opens my booklet to the right page, and keeps an eye on me throughout the ceremony, ensuring that I follow and chant the transliterated Chinese. The service, punctuated by the sound of claves, bells, and dynamic prostrations and bows, resumes its weekly prayers for the liberation of the dead and all other sentient beings. Today, the dharma talk focuses on *Kinh Địa Tạng*, the Earth Store Sutra, its instruction of filial piety, and the importance of respecting one's elders and ancestors, just like the Buddha did.

The melodies started out light and engaging, as if coaxing the spirits to join us, feed on the food set out for them, and listen to the teachings. They now grow macabre, ominous. The service concludes with the usual crescendo of chanting, drums and bells, signaling to the spirits that it is now time to go away. It is as if we were telling them, "Good-bye! Go on, it's over! Party's over," Cô L explained. A special ceremony and prayers reserved for the master's deceased mother follows. Her eight children are here, performing the necessary rites to release her soul and guide it to A Di Đà Phật's Pure Land, hoping to end its wandering and suffering. Six of them are monastics. They line up to face the altar, overflowing with offerings of fragrant flowers and exotic fruits, soup, sushi, and expensive chocolates, framing the picture of their mother's face. The brothers and sisters kneel, somber, resigned as the occasional tear rolls down a cheek. A couple sob quietly. Cô P explains that the Buddha gave numerous sermons on the importance of showing respect and devotion to one's parents. Even Buddhist monks and nuns mourn and care for their very tangible dead. A sense of closeness generated by shared grief binds the small group of congregants left in the room. I am moved by the tenderness of their mourning

and fear that my unfamiliar presence might violate its sanctity. I leave the room and retreat to the kitchen.

~ *Cô T*

All congregants and monks visiting from surrounding Québécois and Ontarian pagodas are invited to stay for a meal of vegetarian *phở*. I see Cô L conversing with the other volunteers in the kitchen. She turns to me as I approach her, and smiles. Taking hold of my forearm and pulling me close, she first introduces me to Cô T, the volunteer in charge of selling the food cooked with weekly leftover donations. We approach her table. “A Di Đà Phật,” Cô T says, greeting me with a bow and a smile. “Mô Phật,” I answer, pressing my palms together, grinning. Cô T asks me if I know why we greet each other in such a way at the temple. I tell her that I do not. “It means ‘greetings,’” she explains. “It can also mean anything, everything... instead of saying thank you, we say ‘A Di Đà Phật.’ It is to remind you that you are yourself a future Buddha. And that we too can become Buddhas. It’s to remind ourselves that we have the Buddha within us.” “Right,” Cô L adds, “we wish each other Amitabha, that is, liberation, that we may be reunited with, or become, Amitabha.”

“But we also chant it,” I start.

“We do, we do. This is one of our most important practices as Buddhists in this temple.” Cô L says.

“And what good is there to chanting the name?” I ask.

“Well, many things, really. Because when we... The name enters the mind and fills it, you’re obsessed with it, that’s all you see. And when you die, that’s also all you see. That is, you don’t see anything else but Amitabha’s light. Otherwise, you’re scattered around, thinking about mom,

dad, about the last boyfriend that left you, a friend who has... The mind, you see, goes from one problem to the next. [We chant] to focus on one thing, so that we are spared pain and misfortunes. If you can get out of there, you will live in a better state, closer to Enlightenment. We don't waste time. In your next life, you hope to again improve gradually... otherwise you feel remorse, or hatred, and that takes us nowhere other than down. It is to avoid all of this that we recite the name," Cô L answers.

"We can recite other names than Amitabha's, you know. Like Quán Âm ... but Amitabha is easier: Namô A Di Đà Phật," concludes Cô T.

Chanting the Buddha Amitabha's name "A Di Đà Phật" is a widespread Vietnamese Buddhist practice, and is common to most of my interlocutors, especially at the temple. For Cô L, it is a habit. She wakes up in the morning, and "Amitabha, Amitabha, Amitabha!" Cô T only has time to chant in the evening. During the day, she works at the temple, and focuses on the work exclusively. "The work itself is a kind of meditation already, right," she tells me. "And chanting Amitabha, is that also a form of meditation?" I enquire. "Well yes, of course. I do it in the evening. But, when I work, I can't tell people, 'Would you all keep quiet? I'm praying here!' That's no good, no good at all."

The idea of work, especially work at the temple, as a kind of meditation is also visible in Cô L's practice. She had once explained that simply being in the temple brought about transformation to the individual, who would become infused with the serenity of the space and as a result attain higher levels of equanimity. Cô L also told me that when she works in the kitchen, doing the dishes for instance, she meditates. "You keep your mind... you don't allow your mind to float away, here and there. And you think of yesterday, and [the mind] drifts further away... You keep your mind serene. That is also a kind of meditation." Speaking of cooking, Cô L adds,

“When I am upset, or mad at someone, the people here, the monks, they immediately can tell. Because the food, oof! Haha! It is burnt, oh yes, yes. And it’s a little too salty... They can tell.” Instead, she keeps her mind focused on the task at hand. “When I’m cutting the carrots, I’m cutting the carrots.” She does not chant while she cooks or cleans, however.

Cô P also chants every morning. She doesn’t recite “A Di Đà Phật,” but she recites *Chú Đại Bi*, a *dhāraṇī* closely associated with Quán Âm, twenty-one times. Cô P chants to soothe her mind. She comes to the pagoda for the same purpose: it clears the head. Like Cô P, Cô L is very attached to Guanyin and to all that she represents. She explained that keeping Guanyin in mind led to righteous actions and could be salvatory: “Yes, she is very important to me. And I pray to her constantly! And to Amitabha, naturally... I pray to Sakyamuni in the morning. But, after that, I pray to Amitabha and Guanyin. Because prayers to Amitabha are for our death, for our future. But Guanyin, she’s for the now. So, all her images, they protect me. It is very important, you know, to focus the mind to do the right things. We remember the saints, the goddesses, Jesus, or Mary... everything that is good. You keep that in your head, you keep the image there, a good image, and that, that will keep you from... it will guide you to... and upon your last breath, if you have always kept that same image, you go to that image. That’s why we are told never to keep grudges! Because when you die, you will be directed to the bad things. That’s why we practice. For our last breath. It’s not easy!” I asked, “So, is it preferable then to pray to Amitabha? Instead of to the others?” She answered, “Every person represents something, something that can help us. It depends on affinity. It’s like you and me, we had the affinity to meet.” She adds, “That’s what Sister was telling you the other day,” as Sister, smiling, comes our way to greet us. “*Duyên*. It’s affinity.”

Sister is 62, and became a nun when she was 40, after her mother's passing. She often works in the kitchen with the other volunteers. Sister got interested in Buddhism later in life, and it serves as a guide for her. She sees problems that arise as lessons from the Buddha. The last 22 years she has spent at the temple have allowed her to reflect on the Buddha's teachings, and especially on the interconnectedness of all things. A couple weeks earlier, I asked her what she would deem to be the most important Buddhist teaching or concept to her practice. She answered "*duyên*," but was hesitant to explain what it meant to me in English. She started, "*Duyên* is knowing that we are all interconnected, stuck together. It's knowing that, if something doesn't work out perfectly, it's ok. There are lots of things at play. *Duyên* is maybe... source... or reason." To her, *duyên* serves to provide a reason for why things are the way they are, and sometimes do not work out in the way we expected them to. Given that all things are interconnected, various conditions must be aligned for a particular event to take place.⁵⁶ One must not hold on to expectations given that one cannot control all the elements that bring about the desired outcome. "When it happens, it happens," Cô L had explained. "It is as the Master said: 'Do not force, it depends on *duyên*.' What good does forcing bring? We leave it as is, it's better [...] and we keep no... grief or grudges, nothing." Letting go of regrets, that is, welcoming things as they come and refraining from forcing them to fit fixed expectations, was central to Buddhist practices at the temple.

⁵⁶ The Assistant Master at the pagoda, explaining why people chose to get involved at a given pagoda and why I had ended up at Chùa Quán Âm told me that I had "*duyên*," affinity, here. To him, *duyên* was synonymous with impermanence: "What all this means, is impermanence. Because, there are the conditions that come together... all the right conditions come together in a... specific time... and something happens [in a specific way]. And that is why there is also no... atman, no ego, no self. That's all. [...] everything depends on the conditions."

~ *Cô M*

Another woman, who was eyeing me curiously during the ceremony, joins us by *Cô T*'s table of goods. "A Di Đà Phật," she greets us. "A Di Đà Phật," we answer, bowing slightly. She approaches me and asks me who I am. I tell her about my research. She seems delighted, and immediately jumps into telling me about herself, the ceremony, and the dharma talk at the end. Just like *Cô L* and *Cô T*, *Cô M* is retired and volunteers at the pagoda every Sunday. She explains that the ceremony today focused on Chapter 7 of the *Kinh Địa Tạng*, about filial piety. The ceremony was technically to honour the master's deceased mother, but in practice, it served to revere the dead in general. "When one is ordained, one becomes brother, sister, mother, grandmother of all members of the Sangha, of all beings," she explains. "That is why the monastics wear the yellow bands around their heads. To signal that they don't belong to a single family, that they have retired from society, and that when they accumulate and generate merit, they don't do it for themselves, but for all. To save all living beings, to redistribute..." When monastics pray, *Cô M* thus explains, they do not simply do so for their own dead. They pray for all the dead, and for all beings. The ceremony also served as a reminder to the laity to be filial, that is, to care for elders, and the dead appropriately, just like the Master and his siblings.

Cô M explains that there are many different types of Buddhism, but that at their temple, the focus is on death, and that most of the congregants come to pray for the deceased. In everyday life, she says, it is important to practice, to recite the name of Amitabha to avoid unnecessary suffering. This guarantees that our mind is focused on only one thing. It is most important to practice doing this for the moment of death. In the end, *Cô M* explained, the last thing one sees when one dies is where one will go next. The last thing we see, therefore, should

be Amitabha, so that we can be brought to him, instead of being tied up here, in the world of the living. By chanting, a habit of focusing on the good is created.

Cô M tells me that she became interested in Buddhism after her mother died, during adulthood. To find solace and understanding of the death process, Cô M turned to the sutras. She immersed herself in the Tibetan Book of the Dead, and was particularly interested in Chapter 8, which describes in great detail the journey undergone by the dead. Cô M says that, upon reading it, she experienced a kind of illumination. The descriptions took her back to her eleven-year-old self, at a time where she was very sick, and found herself between life and death. She remembered lying in bed and seeing her ancestors surrounding her, staring down at her. She felt pulled toward them, toward their light. “I saw, I experienced it,” she told me. Fortunately, Cô M eventually got better and survived. She forgot all about the incident. Her father, who had a scientific mind, had told her to let go of those beliefs. As she became more and more interested in Buddhism, her attunement to the supernatural was restored. She started seeing her grandfather in her dreams. He had too many ties to life in this world; he loved his children and grandchildren too much. Cô M’s grandfather would worry about them and could not let go. His soul would hang around, wander. But, she says, since she has started regularly chanting A Di Đà Phật and praying for him, she does not see him anymore. “Spirits who do not let go stay stuck,” she says.

“We can connect with spirits through blood ties,” Cô M adds. Family members that share the same blood can call their ghosts back to them by evoking their name or offering them food. The living then sing sutras to guide them to A Di Đà Phật, to relieve them of their pain and to let them know to let go. The ghosts are meant to see that the living are alright, Cô M explains, that all is well, and that they can leave. Cô M also tells me that the Master’s dharma talk explained that when we offer food to parents, when we pray and think of them, they receive it or feel it in

some way, due to blood ties. They can feel our sacrifice, our gift, our compassion, and part of the merit created by praying will be transferred to them.

Cô L interrupts us, and asks Cô M to leave me alone so that I can eat. Cô T places a steaming bowl of pho on the table under my nose, handed to her by a woman who has been pacing back and forth from the big kitchen to my right to a smaller one farther left, closer to a second cafeteria dedicated to the congregants who stayed for lunch. Cô L motions for me to sit down. “Eat, Eat! It’ll get cold.” I watch the small, energetic woman decisively walk up and down the room, shouting orders in Vietnamese, quickly greeting friends in passing. “Who is that?” I ask. Cô L answers, “Oh, that’s F! Another volunteer. She cooks on the weekends in the kitchen, but she’s not retired. She’s a businesswoman in the financial sector.” Cô L stops her as she comes near us and introduces me. Cô F first concernedly enquires about whether I like the food and if I have enough. She then asks me about my research, furrowing her brow, firm but smiling. She lets me know that she is here to answer all of my questions about Buddhism and hopes to see me later so that we can talk more after lunch. She dives right back into the action, resuming her laps out on the cafeteria floor.

~ *Cô F*

Later, Cô F, Cô M and I regroup to do the dishes around the double plastic white sink of the large kitchen. Cô F washes dishes, I wipe them dry, and Cô M puts them away. Cô F explains that what I must understand about Buddhism, what is most central to it, is the circle of actions and consequences. “When you want to grow a plant, you must first sow the seeds,” she says. To grow, the plant then needs to be kept under certain conditions: you must water it, give it sun, and the right soil. If the conditions are absent, the plant cannot grow. Cô F says that the same thing

goes for human beings. Everything has a cause, everything has a consequence; nothing just happens. All things are in fact always the result of many elements taking place at the same time. “Buddhist philosophy,” Cô F says, “it’s great. But you need people who have the right karma to understand it. Who are enlightened. When we’re in the dark, we cannot see the light. We don’t understand.” I ask, “The word *duyên*, does it resonate with you?” She answers, “Of course, yes. *Duyên* is the expression of the law of cause and effect. Nothing just happens.” Cô F translates *duyên* to “connection.” “The fact that I’m talking and explaining this to you today, it’s not a coincidence. There’s no such thing as coincidence.”

I ask Cô F why we make offerings. She answers that offerings are symbols: “You know, nobody comes down and eats all of this, haha! The Buddha, or your grandma, they don’t come down to eat, no. It’s to show respect toward your ancestors. Compassion. Then, they can see that you are compassionate, and if they’re stuck, this can help them.” She adds, “It’s also to create good habits, and merit. You give to do good.” Cô F also explains that they chant to relieve the ghosts of their suffering. They chant to help spirits let go of this world, to which they no longer belong, and to encourage them to allow themselves to be reborn somewhere else. “So, we pray for them, but also for us, because it also hurts us, causes us pain, to see them so unhappy and miserable.” Food is gifted to the spirits to invite them down as congregants chant for them, and essentially to tell them to let go and to go away. According to Cô F, this is done for their own good and liberation, but it is done for us too.

CONCLUSION

This chapter aimed to provide a glimpse of what we might uncover when we start our investigation from the kitchen, together with those who inhabit it. The chapter has demonstrated that the dynamics binding the Vietnamese Buddhist community can be understood by paying

close attention to what the women are doing, and in this case, taking the labour of feeding seriously. The exploration of a single Sunday service through the eyes of kitchen volunteers has allowed us to zoom in on the mundane happenings at Chùa Quán Âm, and on those who ensure the proper unfolding of the event. This has established that much of the production of religion takes place within what are often regarded as sacred spaces' profane spaces, labour, and inhabitants. The women who cook; sell baked goods behind counters; feed the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and spirits before the service; march around the cafeteria floor ensuring that everyone has what they need; and do the dishes truly sustain the Vietnamese Buddhist institution and community.

The women of the kitchen were not only the ones who kept the pagoda space clean, welcoming, and serene through upkeep of the gardens, feeding of the monks, nuns, buddhas, bodhisattvas, congregants, and spirits, but also had ideas of their own about why they were here, and what they were doing. *Duyên* had brought them to Chùa Quán Âm, and they had, as a result, taken it upon themselves to feed the living and the dead to cultivate compassion, help spirits let go and generate merit for family members and for themselves. They chanted to train their minds to focus on a single thought and task at hand to both lessen their suffering in the everyday and ensure that, at the moment of death, they would be fully absorbed in Amitabha's light. They also chanted to lessen the pain of wandering, grasping ghosts, to provide some comfort to *cô hồn*.

This chapter introduced some important themes central to our following discussions of Buddhism in the everyday. It established that the Vietnamese concept *duyên* serves to explain why things happen the way they do, as a reminder that different conditions gathered in a specific time and space bring about an outcome that will inevitably change once new conditions appear. *Duyên* is therefore closely associated to the concept of letting go of expectations and accepting

as is. This chapter also highlighted the individual responsibility to honour one's own and others' dead, and to generate transferable merit to relieve their pain. Mourning appropriately included chanting, exhibiting of grief, and importantly, feeding. At *chùa*, care was effected through gifts of food. Prior to the service, Cô P offered food to *cô hồn* and ancestors to bring about liberation. My interlocutors made offerings to show gratitude, respect for their family, as well as to condition positive behaviours. After the service, congregants and monastics were served a meal meant to be shared as a family and community, to relieve some of their pain.

Finally, the dead, as we will continue to see, in this chapter are tangible: they get stuck, feel pain, grow hungry, appear in dreams to express their dissatisfaction, and experience loneliness. The dead, and to some extent death, are very much part of everyday life.

CHAPTER TWO – BUDDHISM IN VIETNAMESE-QUÉBÉCOIS EVERYDAY LIFE

This chapter details some ways in which Buddhism informs the everyday life of ordinary Vietnamese Canadians in Montreal. The questions that drive this section are: how is diasporic Buddhism lived out in the public sphere, in the secular and profane? What role does it play in shaping “secular” activities, and daily interactions? This chapter also challenges traditional distinctions between culture and religion and argues that boundaries between the two spheres must be bridged in order to truly understand immigrant Buddhism in the West. I aim to show that the reification of practices and beliefs, and ensuing systemization into discrete categories of “cultural” and “religious,” obscures the role of the mundane in containing and producing religion (and vice versa). I illustrate this by demonstrating that Buddhist teachings have been integrated in the cultural ways to go about the world of ordinary members of the Vietnamese community in Montreal, which continues to change through generations, as part of a different, also ever-changing Québécois environment. As we will see, Buddhist concepts and attitudes can be traced through generations, but under different forms and labels. For instance, to explain their views, first and 1.5 generation interlocutors often used the doctrinal Buddhist terms (karma, “letting go,” *duyên*). The second generation mostly did not reference Buddhist terms, but nonetheless exhibited the attitudes prescribed by the teachings in daily encounters.

The following sections thus demonstrate that, by applying Buddhist teachings in their day-to-day life in various ways, Vietnamese Montrealers shape diasporic Vietnamese Buddhism and thereby contribute to broadening existing, mostly text-based, accounts of Buddhist doctrine.

MY INTERLOCUTORS

Chapter Two and Three are based on interviews I conducted with 20 members of the Vietnamese community. Interlocutors of the first generation (aged between 65 and 80 years old) included in this paper are Cô L, M. Vu, M. Q, and Mme Le. All except Mme Le considered themselves Buddhist. Those of the 1.5 generation (aged between 36 and 64 years old) are M, F, V, and T. Out of them, only M and V described themselves as strongly Buddhist, and identified their religious affiliation as an integral part of their identity. F described herself as a *believer*, rather than as a practicing Buddhist. T did not consider herself a Buddhist. K, G, H, Mi, Vi and A were second-generation immigrants (18 to 35 years old). P was also aged between 18 and 35 years old, but immigrated to Canada more recently with her parents, who were economic/skilled worker immigrants, before the age of 18. I will count P as part of generation 2, given her age, differences in experience with the 1.5 generation who lived through the war in Vietnam, and similarities with the younger age group. P and G considered themselves strongly Buddhist, K and Mi were somewhat Buddhist, and H, Vi and A were non-Buddhists, although they conceded to having a Buddhist background, prayed, performed Buddhist rites, and celebrated Buddhist holidays.

DIASPORIC VIETNAMESE BUDDHISM IN MONTREAL

Buddhism seemed to be interwoven into the lives of my interlocutors in four main ways. First, most of them spoke of Buddhism as a guide for good behaviour, as a means for self-improvement, and as a key to transformation into a “good person.” Second, they emphasized how Buddhism, and by extension Vietnamese cultural norms, mandated respect in all aspects of one’s life, and for all life. Third, Buddhist notions of “letting go” to avoid unnecessary suffering

and maintain harmony or equanimity (*équilibre*) were central to informing Vietnamese-Canadian ways of behaving in the public sphere and at home. Fourth, karma, and its related concept *duyên* (affinity), were key to shaping my interlocutors' worldview. The following sections detail where these patterns are visible in the everyday life of Vietnamese-Québécois in Montreal, and how they inform their engagement with others, out in the public sphere.

BUDDHISM AS A GUIDE AND MEANS FOR SELF-IMPROVEMENT

Christian church bells, when rung, can be heard from kilometers away. Traditionally, they served to call congregants to worship, to alert them to the service taking place. When the Buddhist bell such as the gong is struck however, a tuned, echoing note is produced. The sound is deep, resonant, and rather rounded, as if encouraging a turning inward, an attunement to what is within.⁵⁷

This bell analogy was used by M (Gen. 1.5) to illustrate what she thought was the most palpable difference between Buddhists and Catholics, and by extension between Vietnamese-Québécois and French-Canadians. M argued that Vietnamese Buddhists are calmer and tend to “turn inwards.” Catholics, on the other hand, extend outward and rather seek out what one might consider external to them. “Us [Buddhists], we work from *within*.” For M, Buddhism provides a framework to self-improvement through inner transformation: “I don’t have the time to think about everyone all the time, but what I can change is me, inside... One day, I discovered, you can’t always be there for those around you. It estranges us... You really must focus on yourself.” Turning inward rather than out therefore allows one to connect with how one reacts to and perceives what goes on around them. Working from within enacts a change there first and

⁵⁷ Field notes, September 6th, 2022.

prevents the self from being estranged from itself and its purpose, and from others. According to M, the individual Buddhist's purpose is to embody acceptance, or tolerance, and equanimity. "You know, they'll never—we don't fight in the street. Or, if you're in a car, and a person wants to turn left, or right, they're rushing... just let them go! You won't save that much time, you won't gain anything from passing them." Buddhists, M proceeded to explain, believe that beings "are meant to suffer" because they ask for too much. It is their responsibility to "accept the situation, accept, let go," to "accept that we suffer, and understand that when we ask for too much, we suffer more." In M's Buddhist framework, beings create their own suffering and possess the means to lessen it by turning inward, working from within, and cultivating peace within oneself, and with others, through acceptance.

For V (Gen. 1.5), "everyone pursues happiness," and yearns "to be happy within oneself" in everyday life, at work or with one's family. Buddhism can be used as a guide to reach that goal, by "trying to become the Buddha," or a "good person." V believes that this is done by cultivating a calmer mind, serenity, and connection with others through daily activities. Every day, V meditates by chanting the Buddha's name, A Di Đà Phật. Through this practice, V is symbolically calling to mind, and "reciting what [the Buddha] taught us in the morning," in order to then "apply it throughout the day," and reflect in the evening on whether his actions and thoughts conformed to the teachings. He explains, "At night, we go over our actions of the day, our speech, our thoughts, and we ask ourselves if this corresponds to what the Buddha teaches us. And day by day, we try to change our behaviour, our way, our perspective toward others. The Buddha teaches us to be uh... close to others. To help others, and to have a good attitude." Chanting meditation trains one to "focus one's mind, one's thoughts rather... toward a single thing." Crucial to this meditation is the idea of "coming back to the self," like M's notion of

“turning inward,” which “allows us to detach from all other thoughts. And as a result, the mind is more serene. And we can see better.” Being at peace as a result of seeing better allows for more mindful and intentional interactions with others, “Because when we are calmer, we are able to see not only our actions, but also those of others. And how you interact with others.” Clear-sightedness leads to better attunement with others, and the self. “When we have a bad thought, or exhibit bad behaviour, we’ll realize it more quickly,” and reorient oneself to react righteously, in accordance with the Buddha’s teachings that teach us to foster good relationships with others. Fostering good relationships also comes from upholding the Five Precepts (abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxication). For V, individuals are responsible for their self-improvement, for working toward becoming a good person, and eventually a Buddha, by fashioning the self’s actions and thoughts in a way to better attune oneself to, and nurture relationships with, others.

Cô L (Gen. 1) also emphasizes the importance of reciting prayers daily. “Prayers are always lessons. The Buddha preached for more than 50 years, and that is why we have several sacred books⁵⁸... We base ourselves off them to live our daily lives [...] They serve as examples.” Specifically, as mentioned in Chapter One, Cô L tries to emulate Guanyin, who is most importantly compassionate, “always lucid,” and never intervenes rashly, personality traits also praised by V. She emphasizes that Buddhists should strive to “accept” and refrain from keeping remorse or grudges—something M also discussed. Echoing V and his emphasis on training the mind to be still, Cô L explains: “Most important is to be mindful of doing the right

⁵⁸ My interlocutors often mentioned “sacred books” or “sutras,” but were not comfortable expanding on what those writings were or where I could find them.

thing. We think of the saints, the goddesses, Jesus, or Mary... whatever is good. You must keep that in your mind, you keep the image there, a good image, and that, that will keep you from... it will guide you to” what is good, a more favourable rebirth, or A Di Đà Phật. “This is why,” she adds, “they tell us not to keep grudges, bad thoughts. Because you will be led to that bad thing! This is extremely important. That’s why we spend our lives practicing... For our last breath!” For Cô L, practice is grounded in the embodiment of what is good, compassion, and clear-sightedness, which leads to thoughtful and intentional right actions, which all support a good death. “It’s always us that do [unto us]; there is no one else.”

For M. Q (Gen 1), Mahayana Buddhism, the “Great Vehicle,” is a process of self-improvement, a path to becoming “a good person” through the right treatment of others and the respect for all living beings “who want to live.” He opposes this goal to that of the Theravada Buddhists of the “Lesser Vehicle” [his words], who wish to attain liberation of the self through individual meditation. M. Q emphasizes the importance of living well amongst others, of doing good, of loving, and helping others, like V who stressed that “Buddhist practice was not about retreating to a corner to pray alone.” Most important was practicing *chanh niêm*, “awareness,” or consciousness, sometimes translated to mindfulness, daily. *Chanh niêm* means “gluing your body and soul together.” “Here and now” is what is most important to M. Q. What one must strive to do is bring the mind, or the soul, back to the body. “So, if we’re having lunch here together, as we are, conversing... you can’t allow your mind to have lingered in the *Galleries Saint-Laurent!*” We must bring both the souls and the body back together in our daily activities, and be present with others, M. Q explained, just like we are reminded to do as we bow, and bring our palms to touch in prayer, in lotus. For M. Q, Buddhism provides us with the tools to considerately interact with others and to better live together.

The pattern of Buddhism as a means for self-improvement and an invitation to turn inward is also visible in the way K (Gen. 2) speaks about how the tradition has shaped his way of life. He tells me that whenever he complained about others to his mother, she would recenter the issue on him. K explains, “If any problem arose from someone else, like... if ever I complained to my mom that my teammates were doing nothing. She would say that it was my [fault]... she would put the blame mostly on me. [She would answer] that I should do more, instead of blaming it on other people.” He believes that the lesson she tried to teach him was “that it, it’s surrounding *you*. If you have an issue, you shouldn’t blame the others, because they will have what is coming for them.” The right course of action, outlined by K’s mother’s Buddhist framework, which K has adopted, would be to recenter the situation on the self and ask what the self can do to remedy the perceived issue, rather than focus one’s attention on the faults of others. P (Gen. 2), interviewed with K, adds that Buddhism teaches lessons such as, “when someone hurts you, you shouldn’t... return that violence. You should kind of take that in kindness, and believe that one day karma will take care of them.” For P, one should exhibit acceptance in the face of adversity, neutralize it with a kind attitude upon reception, because thoughts and actions of the self contribute to karma, conceptualized as a regulating force explored later in this chapter. Another important part of P’s view is that Buddhism is taught through stories and personal take-aways: “It’s like, when you read a children’s book, and then you have to take away the message at the end? It’s the same thing.” She contrasts this way of teaching to what she was taught in Catholic school, about the Ten Commandments: “You cannot do this, you cannot do that” rules. Buddhism is to her, much more flexible and “free form.” “They tell you a narrative, and you kind of take away your lessons from it. So, ‘be a good person,’ ‘don’t kill...’” K jumps in and adds, “Don’t hurt any living soul! Even though, [he

chuckles, embarrassed] none of us are vegetarian or vegan.” For K and P therefore, Buddhism loosely informs ways of acting, especially toward others, and teaches to focus on the doings of the self.

According to G (Gen. 2), Buddhist teachings “are very much about looking at you and yourself before looking at other people. There’s no judgment that’s being cast.” For G, P, and K, Buddhism seems to encourage a turning of the gaze inward, an active engagement with and cultivation of the self, as well as an accepting attitude toward others. G contrasts this openness toward the other, exhibited through the suspension of judgement, to the way her Muslim or Christian and Catholic friends were brought up. Like P, she claimed their daily life seemed to be directed by rules, restrictions “you can’t do this, and you can’t do that,” which had not been part of her upbringing. She emphasizes that she tries to follow this teaching in her daily life as she “approach[es] things with more curiosity than judgement.”

F (Gen. 1.5) tells me that she doesn’t consider herself a Buddhist practitioner, but rather a *believer*. “*Je le pratique du coeur*” (“I practice from the heart”), she explained. Like P, F “keeps what is good,” personal take-aways or lessons, from what she was taught, such as the notions of “doing good,” karma, and not killing too much. To her, religion “is a belief that allows one to become a good person. That’s what religion is here for, right? To provide you with hope... also to give your life a purpose.” For F, then, Buddhism provides direction, a purpose to improve the self and to become good, which is focused on actions. She explains that the Vietnamese “live in a way to... you know, we try not to hurt others, as much as we can, and... Yes, if we do good, good will come back to us. But we shouldn’t expect for good to happen to us in return.” This has become a habit that she does not at first associate with Buddhism: “We don’t even think about it, it’s a life habit... When you have too high expectations, it’s yourself who will be disappointed.

It's yourself who suffers [...] Because in the end, it really comes down to us. Us, us, us! Your decisions are your decisions, it's your life." F, as does M, emphasizes the responsibility of the self in causing its own suffering, and the potential to turn inward, and work toward finding peace from within. Like V and L, F meditates, although she does not consider it part of her Buddhist practice. "I discovered it on my own, later in life," she explains. "It helps me work, focus, for... you know, work on me [...] Acknowledge and realize a bunch of stuff too, you know? Because, when you manage to focus, you're less uh... there are so many stress factors in day-to-day life!" For F, daily meditation practice allows her to be focused in, and open to the present moment. She tries to live by the Buddhist prescription against taking life (unnecessarily in her case) and hurting others to inch toward becoming a good person.

Personal responsibility to reduce one's own suffering is also visible in Mme Le and M. Vu's speech (Gen. 1). M. Vu, a devoted Buddhist, explains that a fundamental teaching of the Buddha's is that "no one can save you other than yourself." Mme Le, on the other hand, does not consider herself a Buddhist. The difference between her and "real" Buddhists, she explains, is that she follows the Buddha as a guide. She walks along his path without necessarily believing or making prayers as "real" Buddhists would. What she appreciates most about Buddhism, and what she does apply to her everyday, is the notion of saving oneself. She says that "we are the ones meant to take ourselves out of our own misery," who have the power to end our suffering, just like the Buddha showed us, by sitting under the bodhi tree. Daily prayers serve to gather the strength, to build it within the self. Little by little, as one prays more and more, one gathers strength to help overcome obstacles.

My interlocutors often talked of Buddhism in relation to a process of self-improvement, an adaptable guide for right behaviour geared to producing good persons. Buddhism influenced

the way my interlocutors worked toward proper cultural interactions with others in their day-to-day, in order to foster a certain proximity, free of judgment and violence. Buddhism was thus important in shaping good relationships with others, and with oneself, encouraging a turning inwards, a coming back to the self and work from there first, then out. This was sometimes achieved through meditation practices (prayers, chanting, silent) and the conscious, deliberate exercise of abiding by the Buddha's teachings, or by simply doing one's best not to cause others pain, and refraining from blaming others.

BEING RESPECTFUL

My interlocutors emphasized the importance of "being respectful" when explaining what Buddhist teachings they applied to their everyday life. V told me, "It's simple: everyday practice is most important. And what the Buddha essentially teaches us is to respect everyone. To respect your parents, to be a good person. To respect the Five Precepts and at least to have a good influence on the family [...] and from there, to apply this in your... thoughts, your day-to-day life."⁵⁹

Being respectful was more broadly related to Vietnamese cultural ways of being in the world. Generation 2 spoke of "being respectful" as one of the most central values to be embodied in the Vietnamese community, and family. It was often associated to "being thankful," "giving thanks," and, to a lesser extent, not causing harm to living beings. H and Mi (Gen. 2) both expressed that they attended the pagoda and prayed for the dead out of respect for their parents, who asked them to, and to uphold tradition. H explained: "If it's something family-related, I feel

⁵⁹ The Five Precepts are: abstain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, wrong speech, and intoxication.

obligated. Well, actually, not obligated; that's not the right way to put it. I feel like I have to go, like I *should* go. It's not 'out of my will,' I want to go as well... And that's just respect. Respecting your ancestors [dead relatives], and your parents too."

For Generation 2, respecting elders was integral to "being respectful." P and K both spoke of natural hierarchy, and the importance of abiding by it. P explained that a word indicating hierarchical status is inserted before the first name of the person you are addressing, "to show that you are respectful." But respect is most importantly exhibited through actions: "So, for example, when we eat together at a table, the kids always sit down last. And the parents always eat the food first. G also spoke of the importance of displaying hierarchy. She mentioned the importance of passing down Vietnamese values such as using the right honourifics when speaking to elders, bowing properly, and serving elders first. Children must sit last, and in her case, at their own table. And, "When you say bye and hi, you have to go in order." "Of birth?" I asked. "Yeah!" she answered, "The hierarchy, right. You need to go to the oldest person, first. You cannot change the order. It's just a sign of respect."

For A (Gen. 2), respecting elders was about caring for her older family members. She has not been to the pagoda since she was eight, and does not consider herself, or her nuclear family, Buddhist. Her practice is not religious she says, rather "cultural." She however celebrates the Lunar New Year and commemorates the dead every year with her family who gather at her grandmother's house over a traditional Vietnamese feast. She joins in to pray because it is "tradition" and "they have always done this, since she was a little girl." A explained that an important Vietnamese value is caring for elders, and mentioned that this was an important cultural difference between non-Vietnamese Québécois and Vietnamese-Québécois. A explained that the treatment of elders with a disease, or dementia, is different in her community. Her

friends would often ask why her mother did not place her ageing grandmother in a long-term care facility. For A and her family, this was unthinkable, “That’s not how you treat [family]... it’s just, you cannot do that. [...] I think that, because this person, who is older than you, has transmitted so many things to you, and has helped you so much in your life, you can’t do this to her. You know, I could never do this to my parents either...”

For second-generation interlocutors, displaying “respect” seemed to be closely related to “giving thanks.” When they pray to the spirits, they usually first “thank them for their blessings, and hope for things in the future.” P doesn’t believe that the dead can intervene, but she still prays because “it’s more like a... practice to hope for things and *be thankful*. It’s more to practice that,” she explains. The practice of being thankful and “hoping for things” is also mentioned by Mi. During our interview, Mi remembered commemorating his deceased relatives’ death as a child. He explained that, at first, he believed the dead would come down and eat. Later, he started to question it, but came to “see the good sides of [the practice]. It’s like you know, about faith, hope... And for me that’s what is important, instead of believing it’s all about ghosts and spirits.” For Mi, Buddhist practices of offering and commemorating the Buddhas and the dead cultivated the habit of directing one’s energies toward a single goal, of coming together as a family, as a community, to take a moment to be thankful for their blessings and hope for positive change. “In a way, it’s good to have hope. It’s good to be hopeful for something.” Mi specified that praying should always be done on behalf of others, for those who are sick or struggling, to bring luck, prosperity, health to someone other than yourself. For G, the most important teaching, imparted to her by her grandfather, was “to not want things,” implying that one should be grateful for what they have, rather than indulging in further desires, which leads to greed.

It was just as important for parents to respect their children. Generations 1.5 and 1 often spoke of the importance of respecting their children's wishes, integrity, and freedom. M, a vegetarian, prepares meat for her children who enjoy it. "I don't want to force them, to influence them... I respect them a lot, and I don't mind [that they eat meat]." Respecting her children, for M, therefore meant refraining from imposing her beliefs onto them and respecting their will and free spirit. F also explains that some of her friends are very adamant on transmitting Vietnamese culture to their children. They are strict on them learning Vietnamese and visiting the pagoda often. But F says she would rather "let her children decide." "Their life belongs to them. If they want it [Vietnamese culture], then yes [they'll pick it up], but if they don't... that's it," she explains. Thinking of parts of her Vietnamese getting lost through her children does sometimes upset F, but most important to her is respecting her children's wishes.

M. Vu explained that the very structure of the Vietnamese meal, composed of at least three different dishes, ensured that children are not forced to eat what they do not like. "Then, if one kid does not like beef stew, then he can eat the sautéed vegetables. There's no waste." He also explained, "The way we eat, it's sharing. It's better to share, as a way to avoid waste, and respect everyone's freedom, who can eat what they want without being forced to eat what they don't like." M. Vu, along with Cô L, and M. Q (Gen. 1), also talked about "respect" in relation to vegetarianism and showing compassion for all sentient beings. "Some branches of Buddhism in China thought that, with reincarnation, we can become a cow, a... everything! So why eat it?" M. Vu explained. "That's all, that's compassion. Towards anything that we could become." Cô L explained that Buddhism, like the Gospels, taught to "Love thy neighbour as thyself. It's the same thing, because we are all born the same... Because there is no difference between... there are so many reincarnations that we are all brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers together

because there are no... frontiers, barriers.” M. Q also preached the “importance of respecting all living beings, because all beings, even the smallest ones such as ants, want to live.”

Vietnamese Buddhism therefore shaped cultural ways of “being respectful” for my interlocutors. Generation 2 mostly spoke of exhibiting respect by upholding tradition, complying with family obligations and expectations, showing gratitude to dead or living relatives, and reverence for elders through ways of caring, speaking and behaving around them. Generation 1.5 spoke of respect in relation to others, and especially to their children. Generation 1 viewed “being respectful” as “not forcing,” but mostly as showing compassion and upholding the Buddhist prescription against killing.

LETTING GO

Verbs in Vietnamese, contrary to French, are always in the infinitive. We situate ourselves in time thanks to words such as “tomorrow,” “yesterday,” “January” [...] In other words, verb tenses do not exist. This structural element of the Vietnamese language perhaps explains why we are unconsciously always living in unbroken time.⁶⁰

During his first sermon at Deer Park in Sarnath, which marked the Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Dharma and the establishment of the Buddhist monastic community, the Buddha taught about the Four Noble Truths, which he came to know as he was meditating under the bodhi tree on the night of his Enlightenment. The Buddha claimed that, 1) existence, in all the realms of rebirth, is marked by *duḥkha* (unsatisfactoriness, suffering); 2) the reason for or origination (*samudya*) of this suffering is *taṇhā* (literally “thirst”) or craving, clinging, attachment; 3)

⁶⁰ Kim Thuy, *Le Secret des Vietnamiennes* (Montréal : Éditions du Trécarré, 2017), 64. (My translation).

freedom from or cessation (*nirodha*) of suffering is brought about by the rooting out of *taṇhā*, the letting go of attachments; and 4) the way is the Noble Eightfold Path (*mārga*), the Middle Way between asceticism and indulgence, which the Buddha outlines for us. The first two Truths are tied to the idea that sentient beings live in ignorance of the impermanence of things and therefore suffer as they cling to their conceptions of them as fixed and possessable. “Everything changes! Nothing stays the same. You can’t expect things to remain the way they are. Because if you do, you’ll suffer. The only thing you can expect for sure, is that everything changes,” M told me. “This is *vô thường* (impermanence).”

Cassaniti writes that letting go is “an ideal with a long history of analysis and aspiration in Buddhist texts, which speak of it in reference to nonattachment and the detriments of clinging to things that change.”⁶¹ She proceeds to explain that the term has been unpacked in detail in religious accounts, but that its presence in everyday life remains virtually unexplored. Through her own work, Cassaniti prompts further studies focused less on “how it *should* work than how it *does* work for people.”⁶² The following pages chart how my interlocutors defined the term in their own ways, through everyday use, without judging their practices and beliefs against classical Buddhist textual formations.

The concept of “letting go” (*lâcher prise* ou *laisser aller*) was prevalent in the speech of generations 1 and 1.5. Interlocutors of those generations closely related the concept to an awakening to the fact that all things are ephemeral and empty of substantial, unchanging, and distinct existence. They also described detachment from things as they are essentialized in the now,

⁶¹ Cassaniti, *Living Buddhism*, 88.

⁶² *Ibid.*

given that they inevitably will change in the future, in order to minimize and hopefully annihilate suffering. The spirit of letting go was also visible in generation 2 ways of being, although there were no direct allusions to the term. Letting go was thus expressed in relation to both Buddhist and Vietnamese cultural ways of being.

Vietnamese writer and poet Kim Thuy, in the quote opening this section, claims that the Vietnamese live in continuous, unbroken time, that is, I believe, a time that does not differentiate between the before, the now, and the after. Vietnamese time allows for existence both within and out of different time-spaces, amongst things that constantly change, and morph. Thuy asserts the importance of living in the now, and of welcoming whatever the now may bring as it comes, knowing that tomorrow, though still in many ways an extension of yesterday, will be different. Holding on to expectations for what is to come, or regret for what could have been, is futile. M. Q also upholds this view when he tells me, as discussed earlier, that what was most important to his Buddhist practice was *chanh niêm*, “awareness,” the “gluing your body and soul together.” Being in the “here and now” and letting go of where you were before, was crucial to M. Q.

“Buddhists, we don’t force it,” M. Vu had told me. In his, and all his Vietnamese Buddhist friends’ views, children should be free to choose whether they want to practice Buddhism and go to the pagoda. His children come to Tết and Vu Lan to socialize, he explained, and they bring their own children with them to folkloric events and dances for entertainment. “If it doesn’t stick, that’s fine! We try, but we don’t force them,” he said. Cô L, as we saw in Chapter One, shared M. Vu’s opinion: “I don’t ever force people. It’s as the Master⁶³ said, ‘Do not force, it depends on Duyên.’ On affinity, the right moment... When it happens, it happens.”

⁶³ The Master at Chùa Quán Âm.

L had emphasized that one should not keep grudges. This would prevent one from being released from *samsāra*. She had added that this is why the Master would tell the dying, ‘Let go of remorse and regret. Go in peace. Think of a blue sky... so that [your soul] can be free/liberated.’” Côté explained that Vietnamese Buddhists should in fact practice “forgetting” every day: “If you have a small fight you must forgive and forget, overnight. Tomorrow, it’s over, we talk about something else.” She said that the sutras and the mantras are helpful in this regard. They help strengthen our capacity to forget, or let go, and cultivate serenity of the mind by focusing one’s attention on the prayers, which to her means that we accept as is: “Things are the way they are, and this is why one should feel no regret [...] What else can you do? It is the way it is. We must accept as is. It is always about accepting.”

Many of my interlocutors explained that, culturally, the Vietnamese refrain from displaying strong emotion. T explained that showing emotion might allow others to know how to hurt or harm you. Therefore, to protect oneself against potential suffering, one should avoid showing their true colours. T explains that, growing up, her parents, as opposed to her French-Canadian friends’, never directly expressed affection, love, or pride, toward her. Instead, T’s parents would ask her “*Tu veux-tu des rouleaux?*”, “Do you want spring rolls?” They never directly told her that they were proud of her, so as not to give the impression that the sentiment, “pride,” belonged to her. It was not hers to keep. Her parents instead aimed to make her feel supported and loved rather than attached to pride, cultivating in her an attitude of non-attachment, of letting go.

M. Vu further expressed this idea. According to him, indulging in extreme emotion disrupts the harmony, or equanimity that Buddhists strive for. One should instead seek out the Middle Way, taught by the Buddha. Compassion pushed to the extreme, for instance, becomes a

possession. “It’s not compassion anymore,” M. Vu said, “And that’s why Buddhists don’t use the word ‘love.’ Because love, pushed to an extreme, becomes hatred. ‘I love you’ is a possession.”

For M, showing emotion, such as discontent or anger, “is against our [Vietnamese] values.” “We’re not like you Québécois,” she added, “who, when unhappy, you protest and yell. We don’t dare, we can’t! We have to accept, work for it, we don’t complain, and we accept.” Culturally, Vietnamese-Québécois strive to avoid conflict. For M, acceptance, or “tolerance,” was central to her Buddhist practice. “In Vietnamese culture... children for instance, we love them. And we forgive them too. We understand that they’re young, and it’s ok. They all have their own temperaments, their faults. I tell myself, they are made that way, and I don’t try to change them. It’s like an acceptance.” M continues, “Because you know, in Buddhism, it’s a lot of acceptance. Accepting the situation, accept, let go. According to Buddhism, we are meant to suffer [...] And why? Because we ask for so much. We want this, we want that, we want to be pretty, we want to be rich, we want kids, we want a happy life... But, so, we have to accept that we suffer, and understand that when we ask for too much, we suffer more.” In her Buddhist framework, M creates her own suffering and has the means to free herself from it by accepting and letting go of expectations.

F explained that letting go of expectations was central to the way she lived her everyday. “You have to live that way because otherwise I think that... if you expect something, you might be disappointed.” It takes years of practice, wisdom, to realize that when “you expect too much, you are the one who suffers.” “Those who can let go, they live a better life,” she explains. This is especially visible in the way she parents her children, as we discussed in relation to respecting others’ wishes: “Their decisions are their decisions, you know, it’s their life. Why should it impact me? And if I feel like it impacts me, it’s because I can’t bring myself to let go. They mess

up, they mess up. They own up to it, it's ok, and they carry on, happy. It's me who is in the wrong if I feel hurt when they mess up." The important part, F reiterated, is letting go, and "focusing on the present, in the end."

My interlocutors did not, however, always speak of letting go in strictly Buddhist terms. F also associated the acquired skill of "letting go" to a cultural trait shared by many of the 1.5 generation. Children like her were "undone" upon their arrival to Canada. They managed to, or rather were put in a situation where they had the obligation to, undo the way they perceived the world around them and reconstruct it according to Québécois cultural standards. They went to school here and simply had to accept that they were not in Vietnam anymore, adapting to a different reality. The obligation to accept and integrate habituated her to approach encounters with an attitude of "letting go" (*lâcher prise*). M also spoke of the acquired skill of letting go and accepting in relation to immigration and integration. Upon her arrival in Montreal at 17, she did not speak a single word of French: "Zero! I was hopeless, I wanted to move to Toronto. But I didn't quit. I started from scratch, and I learned." M tells me that she suffered from bullying in school. "Young people, they don't understand! But I ignored their snarky comments. I didn't take it personally, I kept going and I let it go! [...] I would practice my French, God! I was horrible at it. But it's the same as with a child, you know. You keep going, despite the mistakes. And I listened, and I learned, and I practiced, and progressed. You know, there's an expression in Vietnamese: *người điếc không sợ súng*, the deaf don't fear the gun."

Vi (Gen. 2) further spoke to the challenges of immigration. Like F, he engaged in processes of undoing and rebuilding in accordance with the norm. Vi explains that his name was incorrectly transcribed upon his arrival in Vancouver. "It's actually a typo. Because in Vietnam, you know, you write your last name first, middle name second, then first name last. So, when

someone asks you what your name is in Asia, you say last, middle, first. So on the documents my parents wrote, last, middle, first. But here, everything is in reverse!” As a result, in school, people would call him by his middle name, Q, but that was a mistake. It was Q Vi. “They were like, *what* is your name?” Vi retells, eyes wide, exasperated. After a while, he came to answer, “Call me Adam, call me Adam. It’s simpler.” Vi further explained, “It gets to a point where you choose to have an American name because you get picked on a lot with a traditional, Vietnamese name.” To fit in, Vi felt he had to let go of his name.

G (Gen. 2) expressed similar challenges as regards growing up in a predominantly white Montreal neighbourhood in the 90’s-2000’s. All she wanted was to be like everyone else: “I felt that, as a kid, I needed to put my Canadian identity forward. More so than my Asian culture. And I always felt that I had to kind of hide that part of myself.” She tells me that back then, she “was really adamant, arguing like, ‘Yes my roots, and this and that, but I am most importantly *Canadian*.’” G explains that she actively tried to suppress that part of herself as a child because she just wanted to fit in. K (Gen. 2) told me that the cultural trait of refraining from engaging in conflict with others and letting go also came from the first generation’s emigration and integration journey. “I think that’s one of the main points about why... why there’s not a lot of Vietnamese politics in Montreal,” he starts. “Even though we are a big community here... Because, most of them wanted just one thing, right. Survival. Of their own family and of their community. And so, they won’t talk too much about changing the world or anything. They just want to... survive as, just as a family.” K explains that first generation migrant experiences, as migrants, refugees, and then immigrants in a host country, shaped their way of interacting with the world around them. They aimed to maintain an attitude of not “wanting too much,” not “showing extreme emotion” such as passion or anger, and rather fostered “acceptance,” which

they passed on to their children. What was important was, “Just, have a family, and then that’s it. Don’t try to do more than that. Don’t try to change the world.”

In conclusion, my interlocutors exhibited the notion of “letting go” in several ways. Letting go was expressed in a Buddhist way when related to notions of living in the now, or unbroken time, and accepting things as they are, without imposing inflexible, personal expectations on ever-changing reality. Buddhist letting go also was visible in the cultural avoidance of displaying extreme emotions and maintaining equanimity. Reference to a different, non-Buddhist notion of “letting go” occurred when describing immigrant experience, and related processes of undoing and re-making of the self.

KARMA

“*Duyên* is the true expression of the law of cause and effects. Nothing just happens.”⁶⁴ The notion of karma was, for most of my interlocutors, intimately connected to the elements presented above: responsibility of the self to improve, being respectful, and letting go. Karma, or the law of cause and effect, was an integral part of the Classical Indian worldview and therefore came to be integrated in the Buddhist tradition. Cassaniti explains that “karma is not a prominently addressed concept in English-language Buddhist scholarship” due to its association with the non-scientific, non-rational, and “superstitious.”⁶⁵ On the night of his Enlightenment, the Buddha is said to have had three visions as he was sitting under the bodhi tree. He first remembered his previous lives and realized that his present achievements were the result of those lives. He then used his supernatural power of the divine eye to see all the beings in all the

⁶⁴ Fieldnotes, Chùà Quán Âm, P (Gen. 1).

⁶⁵ Cassaniti, *Living Buddhism*, 150.

different realms, to which he owes his epithet, the one who “knows the world,” or the “Omniscient.”⁶⁶ He finally experienced the Four Noble Truths outlined earlier. It is through this second-watch vision that the Buddha was able to understand how different beings’ actions led to their corresponding karma, and rebirth in the different realms.

Most of my interlocutors, across generations and age, spoke of karma as pervasive in the everyday. For M. Q, karma was a central concept; everything that happens is a result of our karma, that is, the accumulation of past actions. Karma very much informed F’s way of life. She explained, “We try, to the best of our abilities, not to hurt others [...] When we do good unto others, good will come back to us.” For F, it is especially important “not to kill too much,” all this will affect one’s karma. When one kills, one should do it mindfully: “every time you kill [an animal], you say, ‘I hope that you can access a higher rebirth and one day become’” free. P told me, “It [karma] is in everything. They [the Vietnamese] use it in every context, right. So, if you leave rice in a bowl, and then... well people are living in poverty and rice is scarce. So, however many grains of rice are left in your bowl is however many maggots you have to eat when you die. When you go to the underworld.” K adds, “What my parents would say is, the amount of grain of rice that you leave on your plate will be the number of imperfections that your significant other will have in the future.” P and K’s responses clearly illustrate that bad actions, such as leaving food on your plate, will bring about dire consequences in the life to come.

Furthermore, when K explained that one should not complain, or blame others for one’s misfortunes, he added, “because they will have what is coming for them.” Personal responsibility

⁶⁶ John S. Strong, *The Experience of Buddhism: Sources and Interpretations* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2008), 36.

for one's own actions and reactions is informed by the idea that karma will act as a regulating force, which rewards those who do good, and punishes those who don't. One has no control over what others do but knows that those in the wrong will pay the price. M expresses a similar belief as she explains why the Vietnamese do not get into fights or complain: "That's why they tell themselves, it doesn't matter! Karma will happen to them. It doesn't matter, we don't insult them, we respect them, we forgive them." For M, karma is extremely important: "We tell ourselves, 'Ah! They hurt others; things will go poorly for them. But not for us. Because us, we're careful, we care for ourselves, and we don't want karma. We don't do things wrong, because karma, it'll catch up to us. Most of us think that way.'"

V and Cô L spoke of karma as the embodiment of past actions, rather than as an ordering force. Karma, V explains, in Vietnamese is *ngiệp* and refers to "everything we do in life. Like, a profession. Take me for instance, I work as an optometrist... and that's karma." Cô L explains that we are the spitting image of our karma, and it is ourselves who have created this image. There is no God who decides whether someone is beautiful or ugly, rich or poor. But essentially, Cô L explains, we are all the same because we have been reincarnated into different sentient beings so many times and thus been each other so many times. In Buddhism, "there is no good or bad, there are no... categories. People are born the way they are, and you must accept as is. All they do is submit to their karma." She gives me a concrete example: "If two ladies comes in here: one well-dressed, the other less so, they are the same. They are the way they are. There are no differences because... the clothes don't make the man! We accept, we don't judge, and that's it! Let them be!" In the end, Cô L also holds that "For Buddhists, there are no coincidences. [Life] works like a boomerang. That's why, if I see someone who is looking for trouble with me, I tell myself, 'Well! This is a comeback, a payback.' It's karma. And I have to accept it." She

stresses that it is imperative to refrain from feeling angry upon receiving any kind of blow.

“Otherwise, we’ll have to pay again and again. It [anger] attaches us to our enemy. But if we cut [our connection to that person], we forgive, right... we’ll be free,” she explains.

Cô L further ascribes misfortunes to the manifestation of a debt, karma, to be paid. She tells me that she was married to an awful man who caused her and their daughters much grief. She visited a temple one day and there she remembers a monk telling her, “He will stay with you until you have paid your debt. Once your debt paid, he will leave.” And one day, after a few years, he says “Oh, bye!” “He left?” I asked. “Gone! Haha,” she answered, “I was delighted. That’s why [bad things] happen. And then, when our debt is done... as I said, they leave! [...] But some people, they can’t bear it... they regret... regret to have lost. That’s to say, they don’t want to let go of the debt.” Refusing to let go, as we saw above, gets in the way of passing peacefully, the good death, and negatively affects one’s rebirth, one’s karma.

F speaks of karma as transferrable, in the same way people at Chùa Quán Âm did (Chapter One). F said, “The central tenet of Buddhism is to focus on you, your own well-being and to ... always do good! You’re always directed by the idea to do good... for future generations, to repay and hand down the karma.” Rather than solely transferring to different individual lifetimes, F explains that karma can be shared amongst family members, and one has the duty to do good to benefit future generations. She juxtaposes the idea of karma with the belief that her deceased family members are like “guardian angels” who “protect.” Karma “comes back” upon us, but we can be protected from it, perhaps through “the good that was previously done by our ancestors.” For F, her karma can be lessened by her dead relatives. “Sometimes, things happen, and we can’t explain why. Things happen and uh... we don’t know why! [...] And I must say that sometimes, this is why you tell yourself ‘Ah, maybe it’s karma.’”

T expresses a similar view when she claims, “All we are is what our ancestors were.” Karma, negative and positive, here seems to flow down, from the dead to the living: “It feels very light! We carry no weight.” For F and T, karma is shared among families.

For many of my interlocutors, karma was a fundamental organizing principle in their everyday life. Karma was described as the reason for why things happened the way they did, the embodiment of past actions, a debt to be paid, and a mass of transferable matter that could be passed down and benefit future generations.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has demonstrated that Buddhism has much to do with how Vietnamese-Canadians in Montreal think and act in everyday life, including out in the public sphere. My interlocutors relied on Buddhism to guide them to be “good persons,” by encouraging a turning inward rather than out, tolerance or acceptance rather than anger and judgment, and equanimity and clear-sightedness in the hope of fostering good relationships through mindful interactions with others. Vietnamese Buddhism gave them the tools to find happiness and to be close with others. Some also cultivated the cultural disposition of being respectful in the home toward elders and children by upholding hierarchy and relationships of care, and toward others outside of the home. My interlocutors were careful not to cling to expectations, to refrain from exhibiting extreme emotions, to let go, and to live and accept what took place in the here and now. Finally, the belief in karma, an underlying, ordering principle punishing and rewarding depending on personal behaviour, further dictated interactions. Karma provided an incentive for my interlocutors to become good, respectful and caring persons.

CHAPTER THREE – VIETNAMESENESS THROUGH FOOD

To greet each other, the Vietnamese will ask “*ăn cơm chưa*,” “have you eaten [rice] yet?” When entering a Vietnamese home, one is immediately asked whether one has eaten or is hungry, and, regardless of the answer, will almost without fail find themselves sitting at the kitchen table, emphatically prompted to dig into the fragrant, vibrantly coloured dish that has been placed in front of them. Ensuring that guests or family have eaten is the Vietnamese way to check up on others; feeding is their way to enact care. It is especially common for mothers and grandmothers to worry about others’ food intake, as they have traditionally been the ones who cooked for the family. This was certainly manifest in the 1.5- and first-generation women I encountered throughout my fieldwork. Adequately feeding others seemed to be one of their chief preoccupations.

Vietnamese food and cooking were also integral to the identity of my other interlocutors in different ways. For second-generation Vietnamese-Canadians, cultural foods marked them as unique and other, and connected them to home. In fact, as sociologist of religion Tulasi Srivinas writes, in a globalized world where time and space have become warped due to media and travel, and where large-scale flows of goods and peoples are common place, “identity is no longer a ‘taken for granted’ (Berger, 1961) but becomes an all absorbing project that is often enacted through consumption.”⁶⁷ Food becomes for them a marker of distinct identity amidst the instability and constant flux of contemporary reality. But, as Erica Peters importantly argues,

⁶⁷ Tulasi Srivinas, “‘As Mother Made It’: The Cosmopolitan Indian Family, ‘Authentic’ Food, and the Construction of a Cultural Utopia,” in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, ed. by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York, London: Routledge, 2013), 356.

“food is not just about who people are but also about who they want to be.”⁶⁸ Food is thus not simply reflective of identity, but also actualizes individuals’ “interests and aspirations.”⁶⁹ As we will see, food allowed my interlocutors to enact what they viewed as essentially Vietnamese cultural values, often intertwined with Buddhist values. Respecting a vegetarian diet, eating an array of dishes with carefully balanced tastes and colours as a family, or sharing home-made dishes with loved ones performed and created Vietnameseness.

This chapter investigates food preparation and consumption in Vietnamese-Canadian settings, specifically food talk during my interviews. The following builds on the stories of the characters presented in the previous chapters to show that food produces and sustains immigrant Vietnamese identity in Montreal in three main ways: 1) by furthering the transmission of Vietnamese traditions, 2) by providing a means for the performance of cultural norms, and 3) by mediating experiences of adaptation and homemaking in the Canadian landscape.

TRANSMISSION OF VIETNAMESE MOTHERS’ RECIPES

Sociologist and Religious Studies scholar Tulasi Srivinas (2013) explains that the consumption of foods deemed “authentic” in immigrant communities often serves to recreate a timeless ideal of the homeland. Srivinas closely associates this to “gastro-nostalgia,” the need to recreate “the utopian ideal of a lost time” through food, and especially through “home-cooking” or a dish “as mother made it.”⁷⁰ Srivinas holds that “a gestalt of loss and memory” is integral to

⁶⁸ Erica Peters, *Appetites and Aspirations in Vietnam: Food and Drink in the Long Nineteenth Century* (AltaMira Press, 2011), 3.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Tulasi Srivinas, “As Mother Made It,” 356.

cosmopolitan realities, which are characterized by heightened global interconnectivity brought about by the proliferation of transnational exchanges of goods, ideas, and people, as well as the development of communication technologies and resulting increased senses of proximity. Cosmopolitan, from the Greek words *cosmos* (world) and *polis* (city), initially referred to someone who “sought to undermine the boundaries of the *polis*.”⁷¹ The cosmopolitan was the “citizen of the world,” “whose universal circle of belonging embraces the whole of humanity.”⁷² A cosmopolitan space is therefore used to denote one that is intrinsically plural, and pluralist or multicultural. Within such an environment, retrieving what is essentialized as authentic, or singular, and in some ways lost is for Srivinas, “at the core of fighting anomie.”⁷³ For many of the younger generation, learning how to cook the way their mothers did, being entrusted with the family recipes, and eating “authentic” foods could connect them with their Vietnamese heritage, and was essential to their Vietnamese-Canadian identity.

H tells me that nothing compares to his mother’s cooking. It is important to him to learn how to cook his mother’s meals, especially his favourites. He explains that he would like to uphold the traditions, so they don’t get lost: “Yeah, well I would really love to learn. I’ll ask my mom someday.” For Mi, just like H, his mother’s food represents “the ultimate comfort food.” He says that his mother’s cooking inspired him to pursue a career involving food. Mi first went to culinary school, and later decided to take over his parents’ food store after they retired. By

⁷¹ Sutherland *Nationalism in the Twenty-First Century: Challenges and Responses* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 11.

⁷² Pheng Cheah, “What is a World? On World Literature as World-Making Activity,” *Daedalus* 137, no. 3 (2008): 26.

⁷³ Srivinas, “As Mother Made It,” 369.

taking up the family business, Mi preserves and continues to share his family's recipes with other Montrealers. G also wishes to preserve her mother's recipes. She considers herself strongly Vietnamese-Canadian, and says "most of [my identity] is rooted in food." Most of the time, she is able to recreate her mother's dishes, or "something very similar [...]. And it feels very homey. But it's never exactly how she makes it." G explains that she feels disappointed when a dish she has cooked does not taste like her mother's, what she views as authentically Vietnamese. "I'm trying to recreate what my mom has at home [...]. but uh, it's less familiar to me." Growing up in a predominantly white neighbourhood, G felt that, as a kid, she "put her Canadian identity forward" rather than her Vietnamese. She explains that she spent her most "formative years kind of suppressing" the Asian part of her. She believes that, as a result, this has in many ways distanced her from her own roots and precluded her from connecting with her Vietnamese heritage, through cooking for instance, as intuitively as her mother. G, now living on her own, spends hours at a time cooking with her mother, carefully jotting down the latter's vague instructions and approximate measurements, to preserve in written form what until then did not need to be recorded.

Some of my interviewees also pointed to the fact that traces of Vietnamese colonial history remained in the dishes that were being passed down through generations. Tuan Nguyen, in his cookbook *Tastes from Vietnam: From Saigon to Montreal*, writes: "As any element of a given culture, cuisine reflects a people's history, and temperament."⁷⁴ From 1887 to 1954, French colonizers imported their foods, and cooking techniques to the Indochinese Union, which

⁷⁴ Tuan Nguyen dang, *Saveurs du Vietnam: de Saïgon à Montréal* (Montréal : Presses internationales de la polytechnique, 2016), 1.

in turn influenced Vietnamese cuisine. Foods such as *banh* (*pain*, bread), *xúc xích* (*saucisse*, sausage), or *cà phê* (*café*, coffee) brought to Vietnam by the French, retain names phonetically similar to the French terms. Nicholas Tosaj writes that the French colonizers feared the loss of “Frenchness” due to contact with Vietnamese culture, and “eagerly grasped at supplies of canned food from the mainland” rather than “eating significantly fresher and healthier local foods.”⁷⁵ Bread, the French national staple, was central to shaping French identity in the colonies and to curbing fears of “going native” through the consumption of local foods.⁷⁶ Tosaj however explains that “by bringing bread to the colonies, the French brought it into a context where it could be hybridized in the hands of native bakers using foreign flours.”⁷⁷ While the French were highly concerned with the maintenance of gastro-ethnic boundaries to counter racial contamination and to naturalize colonial hierarchy, “criticizing French people who ate Asian food and Asians who ate French food,”⁷⁸ the Vietnamese adopted, innovated, and improved French dishes and techniques. The Vietnamese started baking their own baguettes but with rice flour, given the lack of access to imported wheat flour. The Vietnamese baguette became an essential element of the *banh mi*, a popular Vietnamese sandwich filled with fresh herbs, pickled vegetables, and grilled meat. G explained,

⁷⁵ Nicholas Tosaj, “Finding France in Flour: Communicating Colonialism in French Indochina through Bread,” in *Routledge Handbook of Food in Asia*, ed. by Cecilia Leong-Salobir (London: Routledge, 2019), 29.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Peters, *Appetites and Aspirations in Vietnam*, 16.

“The *banh mi*, right, that is really popular right now... That came from a place where Vietnamese people were not allowed to eat that. The Vietnamese sandwich was created as a resistance movement um, towards the French colonizers, to say: “Well, we can eat that too.” [...] And so, the Vietnamese said, “We can make our own.” And frankly, I prefer the Vietnamese baguette. It’s just, it’s fluffier, it’s lighter.”

To G, the *banh mi* is an example of how transformation of French dishes by the Vietnamese, and the incorporation of French techniques in their cuisine represent an act of resistance to cultural and political domination. For G, the dish “come[s] from a place of resistance,” a history and feature, a “part of [them],” that is important to pass down to younger generations. G further explained, “It’s not just a sandwich, or a stew, you know. It’s... where does it come from? And the context of... it carries much more than just a really yummy stew [...] there’s a lot more layers to every dish.” The dishes are witnesses to the resilience and resourcefulness of the Vietnamese in the face of oppression. They testify to Vietnam’s “rebel temperament toward its invaders, who colonized it for more than ten centuries, without ever completely assimilating it,”⁷⁹ and to Vietnamese-Canadians in Montreal who, by passing down those same recipes and stories, defy erasure.

Openness to French influence also “expanded the Vietnamese culinary horizons” and allowed for the creation of other “dishes that stand today at the core of Vietnamese cuisine, such as *phở*.”⁸⁰ Speaking of *phở*, Mi excitedly confided to me, “It might not be accurate, but I have a

⁷⁹ Tang Nguyen, *Saveurs du Vietnam*, 1.

⁸⁰ Nir Avieli, *Rice Talks: Food and Community in a Vietnamese Town* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 128.

theory for this. I think it's a French soup. Yeah, you know the *pot-au-feu*? And the French, they brought the *pot-au-feu*, but the Vietnamese people converted it. Put their own twist to it: added some fish sauce, noodles [...] So, we have this soup called *Bun Mam* – it's like a pork-based soup with a lot of tomato, a lot of crab, seafood in there – and the way we would finish it is like in a consommé, where you have to prepare a bunch of different ingredients, and then you would have to put whipped egg – um egg whites. And that is supposed to clear your broth, to make your broth clearer.” Mi described how a French technique came to be used in the preparation of a Vietnamese dish that is now viewed as traditional. Within Vietnamese recipes is therefore inscribed the complex history of colonization in Vietnam, of encounters between the French and locals. Clearly, the Vietnamese appropriated some French techniques, but also, as Mi explains, retained their own.

“So, for the French, there will be a lot of blanching, a lot of boiling, searing. And what we will do is different. Instead of boiling, we will steam a lot. So, vegetables, meat... so it retains more of the flavour.”

Mi explains that boiling causes the flavour to dilute into the water, while steaming preserves the taste. The Vietnamese will also fry rather than sear to stay true to a food's taste and colour: “it's about the quality of the products and how to preserve it.” Mi therefore makes the point that in Vietnamese cuisine, “retaining flavours” and colours, that is, preserving the “quality of the products,” are vital.

This emphasis on preserving the authenticity of the tastes is also present in M. Vu and Mme Le's explanations of Vietnamese cuisine. M. Vu told me: “If I compare it to Chinese cuisine for instance. You will never find a fresh vegetable or herb in there. Even iceberg lettuce, you won't believe it, they throw it into the warm soup! Cooked, mixed in. But us, we eat fresh,

always. Mint, rosemary leaves... The country that most resembles us is Thailand. Because there, it's [also] Buddhism." Mme Le explained that the Vietnamese, and especially Southern Vietnamese, were the Asian culture that ate fresh vegetables and herbs the most. She also compared Vietnam to China, where they tend to eat their food sautéed, or boiled. As she served me tea, she poured the hot water directly on top of the leaves and added fresh mint from her garden to preserve the integrity of the ingredients. The importance of tasting all of the unadulterated flavours reflects Buddhist ideas outlined in the previous chapter, such as welcoming things as they are in this moment, of accepting as is, and upholding harmony.

Richard Wilk (2013) writes about the relationship between food and developing national identity in Belize, a country home to contending ethnic identities and transnational flows of migrants and media. He argues that Belizean national cooking "has emerged through an explicit contrast with an externalized 'other.'"⁸¹ "Floods" and "invasions" of foreign goods and peoples conditioned "contrastive" processes of identity formation, "defining the self through defining difference."⁸² I argue that my second-generation interlocutors, growing up in a similar transnational setting, also used Vietnamese dishes to construct contrastive Vietnamese and Canadian identities. Their knowledge of, and familiarity with traditional, "authentic" foods was what set them apart from non-Vietnamese Québécois. They often viewed this as a cultural wealth to be shared with others, or as a source of pride. He explained that knowledge about the different kinds of traditional foods, especially in a setting where he gets to teach his non-Vietnamese

⁸¹ Richard Wilk "Real Belizean Food": Building Local Identity in the Transnational Caribbean," in *Food and Culture: A Reader* by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York and London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2013), 379.

⁸² Ibid.

friends about it, is what makes him feel most Vietnamese. “Let’s say we’re at a Vietnamese restaurant with all my friends,” he explains. “I feel like, ‘Ok, I know this stuff.’ I can tell them what is what. And that feels good because I can show them it’s good, you know. And I feel like a Vietnamese person.”

A also told me that food serves as a medium to share her culture with her friends: “You know, food also... it’s to transmit to others what we eat uh... to show them, I guess.” Recalling a trip to Vietnam with her friends, A retells, “You know, simply introducing the girls to *nước mắm* (fish sauce), oh my god! That was hilarious. C, she doesn’t like seafood, right. But I told her, don’t worry, it doesn’t taste what it smells like! It smells for sure but... [giggling].” It was important for A that her friends, while in Vietnam, try *nước mắm*, one of the traditional Vietnamese diet’s most important sources of protein and minerals, but also, “the essential marker of Vietnamese cuisine and the key agent that defines the unique taste of Vietnamese food.”⁸³ For A, eating *nước mắm* was integral to living the true Vietnamese experience and understanding the culture. A true Vietnamese meal made use of *nước mắm*, F had explained. “It’s a *must!*” For K and P, both very involved in the Vietnamese Students’ Association at their university, food is also a great way to share their culture with non-Vietnamese students. K told me that most of the events organized by the association to fundraise and share Vietnamese-Canadian culture involve food. “The most recent one [event], we did a *banh mi* stand. So, you know, Vietnamese sandwiches. And Vietnamese coffee.”

The 1.5 and first generations did not seem to hold Vietnamese traditional food as a primary marker and maker of their Vietnamese-Canadian identity. However, just like second

⁸³ Avieli, *Rice Talks*, 30.

generation individuals, they did explain that the way food is eaten is reflective of Vietnamese values and central to Vietnamese ways of being.

ENACTING CULTURAL NORMS WHILE EATING

A well-known Vietnamese saying uses table manners as a metaphor for good social interaction, as a reminder to avoid thoughtless behaviour and to be mindful of others: “Watch the rice pot when you eat, watch what direction you are sitting in.”⁸⁴ Daily traditional Vietnamese meals almost always include a pot of rice, a staple food in what is now known as Vietnam since approximately 3000 BCE, along with *món ăn* (side dishes) to be shared amongst those around the table. Rice is arguably the most important element of the Vietnamese meal. It is “the single-most-common activity in Vietnam,” where 80-90 % of the rural population, representing roughly 80% of the Vietnamese people, are rice farmers.⁸⁵ The importance of rice is further illustrated in Vietnamese vocabulary: *com* both means “cooked rice” and “meal,” *com bua* is “daily meal,” and *ăn com*, literally “to eat rice,” means “to eat.” The saying therefore explains that the thoughtfulness informing the way one shares the communal rice during meals should be transposed into everyday life and activities.

⁸⁴ Vietnamese: *Ăn trông nồi, ngồi trông hướng.*

⁸⁵ Avieli, *Rice Talks*, 21.

My interlocutors, on various occasions, illustrated Vietnamese ways of being in relation to how they ate. The dining table served as a stage to maintain and perform cultural norms, which they explained set them apart from non-Vietnamese Québécois. In the previous chapter, my interlocutors explained that “being respectful” was achieved by eating and sitting according to proper hierarchical status (P and K), serving sharable dishes to allow all family members to eat what they liked, to respect their wishes and to reduce waste (M. Vu and Cô L), as well as by displaying compassion through vegetarianism (F, V, M, M. Vu, Cô L, M. Q). The three following sections aim to show that how food is consumed, why the food is cooked, and what is eaten sustains Vietnamese-Canadian cultural identity in Montreal in ways often connected to Buddhism.

HOW TO EAT

“A true Vietnamese meal, when you close your eyes, you should be able to taste all the different component parts on your tongue. A true Vietnamese meal, you’ll recognize it in the softness of the noodles, the rubber of the calamari, the spicy of the chili, the freshness of the vegetables and herbs, the warmth of the sweet and salty sauce, and the taste of the peanuts... Even in the sauce there’s the sweetness, the saltiness, the spice, the acidity... So that’s equilibrium. A successful dish should have all these elements. That’s harmony.”

M. Vu explains that Vietnamese cuisine maintains the integrity of individual tastes. This allows them to meet on the table and on the tongue, to come together in order to achieve balance, or harmony. According to M. Vu, this is the most central tenet of Vietnamese Buddhist practice: “Vietnamese food is about balance, or equilibrium, the basis of Buddhism. The balance between *yin and yang*. This is fundamental, central to the culture.” M. Vu explained that, in Asian culture,

yang (or *am* in Vietnamese) foods are “hot,” that is salty and spicy, and must be balanced with *yin* (*duong*) foods that are “cold,” or sweet and sour. The *yin* and *yang* principle comes from Chinese philosophy, and states that cosmic harmony is maintained through tension between contingent opposites that are in reality two sides of the same coin.⁸⁶ M. Vu illustrates this with an example: “When you eat an orange for instance. And it is incredibly sour. To eat it, you add a bit a salt. Like this [shaking an imaginary salt shaker] ... And it works!” He also mentions the medical properties of heating and cooling foods: “When you have a cold, you eat an apple, or orange juice; that’s sugar. You have a cold, that is cold [*yin*]. If you enhance the cold [*yin*], you’ll prolong the sickness. But, if you eat soup, it helps. Not only because soup is warm, but because soup is salty [*yang*].”

M. Vu explained that harmony, distinctly Buddhist, was also achieved through rules surrounding the consumption of food. As he explained in chapter 1, the Vietnamese meal is composed of at least three different dishes to ensure that all food is consumed, and that members of the family are free to eat what they wish. “The way to eat,” he said, “is to share. Sharing is better, to avoid waste, and to respect the freedom of each and every one to eat what they want, without forcing them to eat what they don’t like.” Harmony was also maintained by respecting aesthetic conventions involving the five colours (white, green, yellow, red, and black), and the five senses: “A human being has five senses: sight, smell, touch, and all of that... Vietnamese food should touch on the five senses. So, the eye: when you approach a table set the Vietnamese way, you should see the green, red, yellow... all the colours. Ok? Harmony is there.” When I asked him why maintaining harmony on and off the table was so important, M. Vu answered:

⁸⁶ Avieli 35.

“It’s... [cultural,] one of the essential things in Buddhism. It’s satisfaction. Never push your thoughts, your actions to an extreme. Even if it’s a good cause. When you push to the extreme, you lose your energy, you lose control. Even if you do a good deed. Buddhism says, if there’s a flood and you work for the Red Cross, if you work 24/7 to help those who survived... you’ll burn out. At first, you’ll be fine. But two days later, you’ll die. If you keep your energy at equilibrium, you’ll be there for three months. It’s the same for thoughts [...] That’s why Buddhists never say the word ‘love’ [...] ‘I love you,’ that’s a possession. That’s why Buddhists, we never speak of love.”

G further informed me that instead of saying “I love you,” the Vietnamese feed one another. Asking about whether one is well fed is “their way to say they care for you” without indulging in overt displays of emotion. When preparing food, Cô L explained that one should do so with care, mindfully investing oneself in the task with “heart and soul,” to ensure that bad, extreme thoughts did not transfer to the food. If one caused harmony to be disturbed by allowing emotions to interfere with the task at hand, others would be able to tell. Harmony, maintained by keeping things at equilibrium and away from extremes, was to be observed on and around kitchen tables, just like in all spheres of life.

As seen in the previous chapter with K and P, harmony could also be brought about by respecting hierarchy and the importance of elders. This was enacted by eating in the appropriate order and at the appropriate time. “It’s just respect,” K had explained. G also emphasized, “if you’re eating at a big table, the elders have to be served first. And you need to wait for them to eat first before you eat. You can’t just say ok, I’m digging in! No. You have to wait for the elders to eat.” Respecting the order was also important in relation to the dead. Mi explained that, during celebrations for deceased relatives, food is offered to the spirits on a table where places have

been set for them. Incense is burned to “give them time to feast, for them to have a seat at the table. For them to eat first.” Mi added that incense burning all the way down indicated that the spirits were finished, and that it was time for the living to join in. He recalled that, as a child, when food offerings were made, he would usually attempt to sit down before the incense had finished burning. His mother would stop him and sternly reprimand him, “No, *you* don’t take a seat.”

It was important for G’s mother that new additions to the family, i.e., partners, respect Vietnamese rules surrounding considerate consumption. She would frown upon the lack of propriety of her cousins’ boyfriends and complain, “Oh, he doesn’t know how to eat this and that!” G explained, “And you know, how you put the table, the chopsticks have to go a certain way. You don’t stick the chopsticks in the rice standing up. You have to put them back down.” In Asian cultures, some of my interlocutors explained, sticking chopsticks vertically in food such as rice is done when making offerings to the spirits. A mishandling of the chopsticks, such as treating food for the living as one would for the dead, is therefore viewed as disrespectful. When one eats at another’s home, G explained, it is imperative that every bite of one’s meal be eaten: “You cannot leave a single grain of rice.” As noted in the previous chapter, P and K both stressed the importance of finishing one’s plate, also using the example of the grains of rice to avoid undesirable karmic retributions. For a people with a collective memory scarred by terrible famines and wars on the Asian continent, as well as poverty linked to migration and immigration to Canada, wasting food was deeply immoral. Eating the Vietnamese way perpetuated culturally respectful behaviour, often explained in Buddhist terms, and habituated my interlocutors to display consideration for elders, the dead, and the living.

Eating meals the Vietnamese way also required all family members to be present. As P explained, in Vietnamese culture, “family is most important. So, it’s always your family, even before your significant other. Because... it’s centered around giving thanks. You have to be thankful to your parents, your siblings [...] Just to show you how important it [mealtime] is, we have a saying that says, ‘Even if God strikes you, he will avoid your mealtime.’⁸⁷” For P, the fact that the family gathered at mealtimes in turn marked the latter as most sacred. K also explained that eating together was very important to Vietnamese families: “That’s also something I noticed in Vietnamese families versus non-Vietnamese families. My mom would be very insistent on the family eating together. At the same time.” A told me that meals, described once again as closely tied to the idea of the family, were at the center of Vietnamese culture: “Let’s say we have a dinner at my grandmother’s. Every family will bring a big dish. There will be a large table with all the food, and we’ll serve ourselves and eat all of it... Traditional Vietnamese food.” Meals therefore constituted a means to bind family members together, and in turn to habituate all to place family at the center of everyday life.

COOKING TO FEED

Cooking in the Vietnamese community also served to bind, through feeding. As if echoing M. Vu, F believed that sharing was central to Vietnamese cuisine, and by extension to Vietnamese culture. She told me, “I love sharing. Sharing, I think, is extremely important in Vietnamese food. Because, as far as I can remember, we have shared our food a lot. Even with my friends here. Whenever we make something, we think the other might like, we call each other: ‘Ah! I’m making this. Would you like some?’ Last week, my friend made me uh... I had

⁸⁷ *trời đánh cũng tránh bữa cơm*

made a cake. Well actually, I had made two. And I gave her one. So, you see, at the back of our minds, we always think of sharing. Sharing to build and strengthen relationships. To sustain relationships too. So, she uh... she brought me a papaya salad.”

G also told me that she gifted food to her friends to communicate her affection for them: “With my friends it’s always, ‘Have you eaten?’ If I’m coming over, you know, I ask, ‘Have you eaten? Do you want to eat, are you craving something?’ And I’ll usually make it for them and bring it with me.” Mi told me that he enjoyed cooking because, for him, it was “about cooking for other people. And nurturing the people that you love, and your friends, and family.” Cooking was a means to share with loved ones, to care for those around him. Food is therefore prepared to sustain relationships, to show consideration for the food itself and for others.

Women have traditionally been the ones to cook and therefore to feed in Vietnamese households. F, M, and T all viewed motherhood as a fundamental facet of their identity as Vietnamese and Québécoises. They described cooking and feeding as one of their prime roles as mothers. The three women told me that they loved cooking, especially for their children. F explained, “I think I got it from mom. She cooked a lot so... I learned from her. It started with Vietnamese food. [...] when I was young, I worked in restaurants... So, I always gravitated around food. And now I cook for my family, and friends. They all love it!” F however explains that, with time, cooking as a mother and as a wife became an obligation:

“It is as if I had it written on my forehead that I am the one supposed to cook dinner, to feed [my family], to... right? And it’s not fun for a person to do this for... for twenty-five years? I’ve been married for twenty... twenty-eight years, ok? I’ve been making the food for twenty-eight years now. You see?”

The feeling of obligation made the cooking so miserable for F that she had to take a break from it. She explained that it is only when she made the conscious decision to start cooking when she wanted to, rather than because she had to, by detaching herself from the ideal of the mother who has to feed, that she reconnected with her passion. M also viewed her role as the mother who feeds with ambivalence. M, an extremely busy entrepreneur who owns a restaurant with her husband, told me that she felt guilty being away from her children when she was at work. She reiterated that, in Vietnamese families, the mother is traditionally the one who prepares the meals. M constantly worried over her children's poor eating habits, small food intake and thin figures, and was convinced that they did not eat properly when she was not home. M herself was a vegetarian, as we saw in Chapter Two, and often expressed the visceral discomfort she felt when cooking meat. She once told me about a time, a few weeks earlier, when she was preparing quails for the children. She described herself deboning the small birds, disgusted and overcome by the sickening feeling that what she was doing was profoundly wrong. M told me that she then started chanting *Namô A Di Đà Phật* to perhaps protect or absolve herself, she was not sure. She hoped that the prayer might bring about some kind of help. M later decided that she could not cook meat anymore, but struggled with idea of not feeding her children in the way they, rather than she, wanted.

T explained that she cared for her sons by cooking for them, in the same way her parents had done for her. She told me that her mother and her would fight over who would bring T's eldest son snacks, while he was locked up in his room studying day and night for his final exams. For both women, to mother was to feed the children. For three Vietnamese mothers of the 1.5 generation, just like for their mothers before them, good mothering entailed feeding the family, but, as we saw with F and M, not without issue.

The cementing of social relationships was important among the living, but also with the dead who required the same care and feeding. The dead were often described by my interlocutors as tangible, somewhat still human entities who could communicate with and protect the living if revered properly. They could also cause harm if neglected. The dead would grow hungry, manifest their discomforts and demands through speech or signs. For the Vietnamese, my interlocutors had told me, deceased relatives and spirits are part of everyday life. “*La mort est dans la vie,*” T had mused as she spoke of the realities of living through the war in Vietnam as a child, living with and alongside her dead, parts of whom were visible in her, as their descendant.⁸⁸ T went to her dead to unload her problems, as well as to remedy to the powerlessness she felt when she missed them. In this instance, spirits had the power to provide comfort, guidance, and solace. Even my self-described non-Buddhist interlocutors celebrated the death anniversary of their dead. They emphasized the importance of feeding the dead and explained the ritual as invitations for spirits to come feast with them. They were not sure about whether they believed the spirits came down to eat, but they liked the idea and very much enjoyed the opportunity to get together as a family. H told me that his family offered food to the dead in the hope that they would eat some of it. The living could then eat the rest. When I asked him why he fed his deceased relatives, H answered, “I think that it’s to uh... to connect with them? Probably? Because if they eat, it’s a bit as if they were eating with us, you know. Maybe. That’s what I feel anyway.” He added, “It’s as if they were coming back to us, to be with the family. They’re always with us.” I asked him if he believed this served the living more than it did the dead. He answered, “Uh... I feel like it’s reciprocal.”

⁸⁸ “Death is part of life.”

Mi also told me, “before we eat, everything that we’re supposed to eat, they’re offerings. So, like... essentially, the incense is to give them time to feast, for them to have a seat at the table... For them to eat first. And when the incense is finished, it’s supposed to represent that they’re finished eating. And then it’s time for us, to actually join in. That’s what it is, yeah.”

G explained that the offerings were made as a way to welcome the spirits back for a meal and send them away afterwards. She described incense as a portal, a bridge between the worlds of the living and the dead. “How my mom explains it, and how I see it, is: when you offer that table, you’re inviting them into your home for a meal. So, you’re offering them food, their favourite meal, a warm... whatever. It has to be an assortment of dishes, and you’re welcoming the whole family to get back together, the ones that passed, to come back and have a meal together. And then you send them back off.” I asked, “So, they feel it, when you offer them food?” G answered, “Yeah! Because my mom, when we burn the incense, we call them, we pray to them, and they know to come back home. So, the incense, it’s the portal.” Vi once again emphasized that the spirits had to eat first, and explained that “they [the Vietnamese] believe the food that you make, and offer to the ancestors, the essence of the food will be sent to the afterlife. The food will be sent to the spirits of the ancestors [...] When that’s done, you can eat it.”

Mme Le, although she believed existence in any form ended when one died, told me she sometimes made offerings and talked to her deceased mother, gesturing toward her urn on a small ledge on the wall above her head as we were sitting at the dining room table of her home. Mme Le did not believe she could communicate with her mother; she was dead, gone. When she cooked a meal her mother enjoyed, Mme Le would place some of the dish by the urn and speak to her. One of her Buddhist sisters wants to take the urn to the temple, but Mme Le categorically refuses. She explained, “I tell her, seriously, do you think mom would rather remain close to her

children, or in a temple with a bunch of other dusty urns?” And so, the mother remains with Mme Le, perched up above the dining room table, partaking in the mealtimes of the living.

When asked about why she feeds the dead, F told me “I don’t know, it’s always been that way. Food... what we like, you know, what we give, it’s from us. We made it with our own hands. It’s from our own labour, because we have prepared it.” I tell F that I find it interesting that in Buddhism, spirits seem to be hungry. “Yes,” she answered emphatically, eyes wide, “Yes... You see, my sister passed away. And uh... it was a long time ago. But uh, you know, I used to dream of her often. And she would talk to me and... It’s been a few years now that I haven’t dreamt of her.

But, right before her death anniversary—at the beginning of the month of August—a few days before [...] I dreamed of her. And I dreamed that she was hungry. I dreamed that she was hungry and that she was eating raw meat. I woke up in the middle of the night and I remember, I was *so* mad! So upset! Because she was eating the meat raw. It had been a long time since we had gone to see her [at the pagoda]. Because of COVID, and it was closed, or sometimes it’s just complicated. So then, I had this dream and I felt the urgent need to go see her.

[...] It’s weird, because she, what she said to me was that she was hungry. You see? She was eating raw meat. She couldn’t wait because she was so hungry. And so I felt horrible, so guilty. Oh yes!”

For F, the dead show themselves, and speak to her. In this instance, she explained that her sister had come to her because she had been neglected. She was hungry and needed to be fed. F’s dead are therefore very much part of her everyday life and require the same continuous nurturing

and feeding as living members of the family. For most of my interlocutors, preparing food to feed therefore sustained good relationships with the living, but also with the dead.

WHAT TO EAT

When asked about their connection to Vietnamese Buddhism, all my interlocutors mentioned being taught about the importance of not hurting others, and often, not causing pain to other sentient beings, including the smallest. For many, a way of enacting this in day-to-day life was consuming vegetarian meals. Traditionally, the Vietnamese meal consisted of a variety of vegetables, and at times a small piece of meat to be shared between family members. K, explaining why meat was so common in Vietnamese-Québécois dining tables nowadays, told me: “Back then, meat was *really* expensive. It was really for the rich, uh, portion of the Vietnamese. So, I think that, when... after the war, and the Vietnamese refugees came to Canada, they conserved that ideology of ‘meat is equal to power,’ or like... rich. So, there’s a lot more meat. And like, meat here is a lot cheaper. So, I think that, that’s why all the meals now have a lot more meat.”

Among my interlocutors however, vegetarianism was a diet reserved to the most devout Buddhists. M. Vu explained that not all Vietnamese Buddhists were vegetarian and that the practice was in fact most common among monks and nuns because it represented a sacrifice and conditioned one to let go of worldly attachments, such as the family, children, or wives, to better focus on others. M. Vu also explained that some Buddhists are vegetarian because of a sectarian emphasis on compassion: “Completely prohibiting meat comes from China. Some Buddhists in China reflected on this and came to the conclusion that, with reincarnation, one can become a cow, a pig... So, why eat them? That’s all. It’s about compassion toward anything one could

become.” Cô L explained, “For us [Buddhists], we avoid eating meat. Out of compassion. Because all animals, just like humans, they are scared of death. They feel pain too. When we cut them open, when we slice their throat; they scream. People say, I’ve heard my parents and everyone say that, people who work in slaughterhouses, those who slaughter cows... when they die, they scream in the same way the animals they slaughtered screamed.”

F revealed that she wishes she was a vegetarian. She recalled observing Buddhist fast days on certain holidays with her mother when she was younger: “No killing. I remember. And every time I would do it [abstaining from killing] with mom, I would feel great. You see, it always comes back to my mother, there’s always this influence, eh! As I said, it’s like we’re anchored [to the culture].” F told me that the Asian/Buddhist way of killing is radically different from the Occidental way. This is due to conformance to the saṃsāric worldview, which both establishes the superiority of human life over other forms of existence given humans’ greater potential for awareness and eradication of suffering, and emphasizes compassionate treatment of all sentient beings who could be reincarnations of past relatives. In Asia, the practice is to cut the animal’s throat and let it bleed out, which, F remarked, people in the Global North find gory. F told me,

“I remember that our sponsors had a farm. When we first came here. And they would kill chickens. So, they invited us to help them. They would kill I think, a hundred chickens or something...

So, when we came—because mom, you know, she always killed chickens [back in Vietnam]. It’s our way. So, Asians, we always kill by the throat, right. And here, they would cut their heads off... For us, you see, we... it’s a normal practice. We don’t think its cruel, you know, killing the chicken by cutting its throat. We had always done it like that, never otherwise.

[...] So we get there, and we were traumatized when we saw them [kill the chickens the way they did]. Because they would take the axe, and hop! Cut the head off. We thought it was cruel. And then, they would throw the chicken to the ground, and it would still be running, without its head. You see?

Anyway, us, we cut its throat, we let it bleed out... they don't move. We hold them still. It's as if we were with them, you know. And we'll say a prayer for them. We'll say, 'Ok, I do this for your own good. I do this so that you can be reborn.' So, there's... this sentiment behind [the practice], this thought for them. You know, it's a life that we take, but to give it back... so that they can be reborn more quickly and have a better life later on. So, us, when we kill, there's a logic to it. While... the person who kills, in the West, they kill just to eat.

For us, there's another meaning because there's a belief. We believe in reincarnation, so we believe that, when we kill, it's for the animal's own good. So that it can move on to another life and eventually become human. Because the ultimate goal is to become human. You have to live through misery to deserve [it]... So that's the belief."

F explained that the Vietnamese cultural way to slaughter and prepare animals reflected the Buddhist samsāric worldview and prescriptions to be compassionate and fully present with the animal in the moment. From her perspective, her sponsors were "very removed" from the act of killing and from the chicken themselves. "They would take one, *thwack!* Another, *thwack,*" she said, imitating the sounds of the axe cutting through the chicken's neck. "While us, we would say a short prayer before... we would pray for them. We always kept them in mind." F concluded that the Vietnamese practice of taking life was rooted in gratitude and mandated full

presence of mind and body. Taking the time to pause and be with the sacrificed animal called awareness to the full scope of one's actions. "We [the Vietnamese] were taught to pause."

V told me that, for religious reasons, he and his wife were vegetarian. He explained that they became vegetarian unexpectedly after witnessing a truck on the highway packed with pigs that were on their way to the slaughterhouse. "That night, [my wife] had a bad dream. She saw that they were being killed, those pigs. And after that she said we would try being vegetarians. And that's how we started." V explained that their decision served to perpetuate "respect for life." And, "not only human life" but "other lives too." Once again, the dead let their presence be known through dreams by demanding to be treated with compassion and respect.

ADAPTATION AND PROCESSES OF HOMEMAKING

"When people lack confidence, they erase themselves," said T, speaking of her generation's (1.5) experiences of immigration and adaptation to Canada. They stop using their first and their last names, switching them out for North Americanized ones to make themselves legible to the new world they now inhabit. In restaurants, they don't dare recreate the tastes of Vietnam, out of fear of non-Vietnamese clients' judgement. When she had her own restaurant, T adapted her dishes to the North-American pallet. But the new restaurants, she noted with a smile, those of the second generation, are over being apologetic for Vietnamese tastes. For generation 2, it is important to be unique and authentic. Generation 2 feels no need to engage in further processes of concealment and translation. They are "100% Vietnamese."

This section is dedicated to a description of how food mediates adaptation and integration of different members of the Vietnamese community in Montreal. It highlights the importance of food in practices of homemaking, or dwelling. Thomas Tweed theorizes "dwelling" as an active endeavour involving three overlapping processes: mapping, building, and inhabiting. Although

Tweed uses the term in relation to religion and how it allows “devotees to inhabit the worlds they construct” by situating them in time and space and transformation of their environment, I apply “dwelling” to interactions involving food.⁸⁹

F explained that, when her family arrived in Québec, there were no Asian grocery stores in her town. They had to drive to Québec city, about an hour away. “And even then, it was only open on Saturdays because the person had to pick up the food in uh... Montreal, and come back... There was a small community in Québec at that time... Where we were, we were like Martians.” F however spoke of her and her family’s marked difference with other Québécois in her host community upon their arrival in a positive way: “That time is full of fond memories for me. You make a lot of friends at that age and uh... I remember, I think we got here in May. The snow had melted and all, but there was a snowstorm. I remember, it was the first time I ever saw snow.” F retold how she and her siblings had gone outside, without gloves, boots or coats to play in front of the house. At one point, two or three neighbourhood kids cycled by them on their bikes, quickly glancing at them as they passed by. “They kept cycling for a bit, and all of a sudden, they braked. Woops!” She pauses, imitating the boys, hands gripping imaginary handlebars, arms extended, chest back, a bewildered look on her face. “They would look back over their shoulders, whispering to each other. They couldn’t believe it. Why were there Asians sitting, you know, in front of that house? You see?” She said this, squinting at me with an amused smile, watching my reaction and checking that she had fully conveyed the emotion of her story. Laughing loudly, she added, “They slowly inched closer and closer... And then, they started pedalling away, pedalling, and pedalling. And I remember telling myself, ‘Oh, they’re

⁸⁹ Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 82.

scared of us!’ You know, because they saw us!” Regaining her seriousness, she added: “And I think 20 or 30 minutes later, they came back with SIX other kids! They were three, and then they were nine in front of our house. And we played together. We couldn’t speak to each other, but we could communicate with signs... They even came inside the house and had a snack, yes! We quickly became friends. I learned French very fast that way.” For F, her difference had not bothered her in the least, but she did note that it had been difficult for her parents to reinvent themselves and adapt to an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar foods.

Vi also recalled times when his family were confronted with the foreignness of Western foods. Around Christmas time, Vi remembers being gifted what he viewed as odd food items by charities during their food drives. He explained, “We... never really celebrated Christmas until we came to Canada. It seemed like it was such a big thing! And in Asian culture, the biggest celebration, it’s Lunar New Year, right. [...] The way we learned about Christmas, I think it was a goodwill, or charity event where they go to low-income families and they bring you a bunch of random gifts. People would just knock on our door with this box of stuff, we had no idea where it all came from. There would be toys and food, like spaghetti... and we had no idea what half of this stuff was! Like *spaghetti*? We had no idea what to do with it. We were just used to rice and vegetables and a little bit of meat, you know. So, uh... we adapted to Christmas.” With time, just like with Christmas, Vi’s family adapted to Western culture and foods.

There were several other instances where Vi related his adaptation to Western society to his adjustment to Western food. For instance, “Food, when you’re very poor and you grow up where I came from, it’s very important. Very important. You uh... as I got older, I learned to really enjoy Western food. More so than my siblings. I guess it’s because I came here when I was younger. And when they offered the school lunch program, that helped too. Because, it’s

like, at lunch, you don't have to worry about lunch. You just go and line up in the cafeteria, the lunch is made for you... They'd give you, you know, mashed potatoes, chicken fingers... and I [was] just like wow! Really good!" Vi concluded, "By the time we changed schools, I spoke fluent English and I had really adapted at that point." Vi said that he didn't eat Western food until it was offered as part of the lunch program:

"You know, me, I didn't really eat lunch. We ate leftovers for breakfast, and then we'd leave for school and wouldn't eat until dinner. My mom would cook once a day, and that meal would also be breakfast the next day. And when the school got worried, they told her, 'He has to bring a lunch.' And she said, 'What do I buy? How... how do you bring rice to school?' We didn't understand the concept of Tupperware and all that. We were so new!"

Vi explained that his mother then decided to buy Western ingredients to take to the Western lunch. She made him a hot dog and handed it to him to take to school: "No wrapping no nothing. It was just the bun with the hot dog, no sauce, that she made me put in the cubby hole. And that was my lunch." Vi explained that the other kids at school made fun of him for this: "They took my hot dog, threw it around, and away. And I was like ok, whatever, I don't really like it anyway. But the teacher saw, and she was really upset. She said, 'That was his lunch. Why would you do that? Now, I'll make you share your lunch with him.' The kid felt bad, so he gave me half of his peanut butter and jelly sandwich. And I was like, I don't really eat this, it's ok, you know. So, I just played during lunch." Later, in high school, Vi took the "cafeteria" course, where they taught him how to cook, food prep and work in the kitchen. He carried this passion for cooking into his adult life; Vi now works in restaurants and hopes to open his own someday.

G, just like Vi, described her integration to Canadian society experience in relation to food. G told me,

“I just remember wanting to fit in really bad. I wanted my snack pack. I wanted my fruit roll up. I didn’t want my rice and like, stewed chicken—that is *so* delicious—but, as a kid, I just wanted to fit in really, really badly. Um, like, nobody... and you know children will make fun of what your food smells like a couple times when you’re in grade 1 or 2. And I remember feeling really self-conscious about that. And maybe that’s probably where I wanted to fit in and to be included... Because before, I, you know, I was Canadian and I was really adamant in arguing like, ‘Yes my roots, and this and that, but I am most importantly *Canadian*.’ And I always put that identity forward...”

G spoke of the differences, or awkwardness, between her and her classmates at school in terms of food. At lunch, G explained that kids would line up in front of the microwave, and wait their turn to heat up their meal. She would have rice, different soups, and a few side dishes while her friends had a single Tupperware, containing one dish. “My mom would pack me, you know, here’s the vegetables, here’s some soup, here’s beef, here’s some rice. And I remember the teacher being like, ‘Oh my god, it’s one dish!’” G remembered thinking, “Well this is one dish!” Her mother packed her lunch like they would eat at home.

Many of my interlocutors’ families came to Canada fleeing South Vietnam after the Communist take-over because of their ties to the French or Americans for whom they worked. Those interlocutors explained that, in Vietnam, their parents had grown up rich, with maids who cooked, cleaned, and gardened for them. It is only upon their arrival in Canada that their mothers and grandmothers were forced to find work, pick up cooking to feed their families, and attempt

to recreate the tastes from home with no access to recipes or the right ingredients. As G explained, “So, my mom, because they were very wealthy, never had to cook a day in her life until she came to Canada. And it was the most um... she always says it was a very difficult experience for her. Because she came in March, there was snow, it was cold, and she—you know, this is in the 80’s, and there was no Google, or YouTube—so she had to find the Asian markets and she had no idea what to do with the ingredients. And so, she learned by trial and error. Which I think is amazing because I would’ve never known! Her food’s A-mazing! And now whenever I ask her—I try to recreate her recipes—there’s no recipe.” Imitating her mother, G adds, “It’s like so, you know that cup that we have at home?” She holds a finger up to about a quarter of an imaginary cup and says, “It’s about to here.”

Cô L also told me that she had learned to cook on her own. “When I was younger,” she explained, “life was different. [My parents] they had the possibility to hire cooks, people... But when I got here, I did not have the same privilege!” Cô L learned to cook the Vietnamese way through trial and error at home, and at the pagoda: “I come here [to the pagoda], I look at what people do, and then I make up. Everything you can find in the fridge, you take it out and you mix it all together.” Mme Le never saw her mother cook or clean back in Vietnam either. Cooks would make their food at home and gardeners would care for the flowers. Everyone in the upper and middle classes had maids, she told me. Mme Le’s mother had to learn from scratch once in Canada. Cooking became part of her identity, as Vietnamese-Canadian and as a mother here, a passion and a skill she passed on to her daughters, who then passed on to their daughters. Mme Le, her sister told me, herself displayed great ingenuity and creativity when she cooked. She had invented most of the family’s favourite recipes and was always the one responsible for cooking family dinners.

Although cooking was not part of most of my interlocutors' everyday life, and recipes were not closely tied to their identity back in Vietnam, it came to be so through immigration and processes of homemaking in a new country. As we see with second generation interlocutors, the recipes, innovatively recreated from scratch by mothers turned cooks and feeders anew, nonetheless came to constitute a cultural repository that connected them to their Vietnamese roots. The recipes were also central in the making of their Vietnamese-Canadian identity, an identity infused with Buddhist values. Interactions involving food in school cafeterias, gifts from charity food drives around Christmas time and ingredients in Québécois supermarkets marked my interlocutors as different, and distinctly other, but also served to acclimatize them to a new, Western reality that they would make their own.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has carried out a study of religion in movement. It has surveyed the stories of members of an immigrant community in Canada, who, after migrating from Vietnam, built a home for themselves in Montreal, Québec. It has demonstrated that their religion played an important role in this process of homemaking. Vietnamese Buddhism was embedded in my interlocutors' cultural ways of going about their lives. It contributed to shaping their Vietnamese-Canadian identity, marking them as distinct within the Québécois society they had become integral to. The thesis has also defined religion as fluid, as a “porous,” “shifting repertoire” of beliefs and practices, contingent on its encounters with different environments and people.⁹⁰ Vietnamese Buddhism shifted as it took root in a Québécois, post-Catholic and aspiring-to-be *laïc* environment, where efforts were made to constrain it within the pagoda. The tradition nonetheless remained firmly anchored in the everyday lives of the Vietnamese in Montreal, as it was tightly intertwined with cultural ways to interact, eat, care, and treat their family members, alive and dead. Whether or not my Vietnamese-Canadian interlocutors viewed themselves as Buddhist, they lived in a way that reflects Buddhist teachings.

This thesis has engaged in mapping Vietnamese Buddhism in Montreal as performed in multiple ways, and constituted through social ties and means of care. I wanted to convey my interlocutors' Buddhism as one very much alike Kathleen Stewart's “ordinary affects,” feelings that have a tangible impact but escape summation, or containment in fixed definitions, and “pick up density and texture as they move through bodies, dreams, dramas, and social worldings of all

⁹⁰ Stone, *Right Thoughts at the Last Moment*.

kinds.”⁹¹ Buddhism was produced and sustained through the feeding of the dead and the living by kitchen volunteers at the temple, and through the offerings of “somewhat Buddhist” Vietnamese-Canadians out of respect for their parents and deceased relatives. Vietnamese Buddhism picked up density as family members followed convention when eating around the table to maintain hierarchy, and through the dreams of the living where dead sisters demanded to be fed or where soon-to-be slaughtered, anguished livestock came to teach a lesson.

As previously noted, the study of immigrant Buddhism demanded an investigation of multiple sites. This thesis focused on the mundane and on the profane. Chapter One explored *chùa* through the eyes of those who work from the kitchen and out into various other profane and sacred spaces. It paid close attention to what five women who were essential to the sustenance of the temple, and by extension of the tradition, did and thought. It highlighted the importance of attending to dissatisfied, lonely, and speaking dead. For volunteers at the pagoda, Vietnamese Buddhism had much to do with liberating *cô hồn* and dying a good death.

Chapter Two showed that Buddhism influenced Vietnamese ways of being. Buddhism was shown to inform my interlocutors’ views on being a “good person,” which entailed respecting by being thankful to and caring for elders and the family, tradition, and the dead. It also included exhibiting attitudes of acceptance and letting go because of, for instance, beliefs in karma (*nghiệp*), or what characters in Chapter One would have termed *duyên*.

Chapter Three highlighted how investigating “profane” food practices and stories involving food was highly revealing of my interlocutors’ Vietnamese and Buddhist identities. I argued that food played an important part in producing and sustaining immigrant Vietnamese

⁹¹ Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 3.

ways of being by allowing for Vietnamese traditions to be transmitted, for cultural norms to be enacted, and by shaping processes of homemaking in Canada. Chapters Two and Three therefore established the influence of religion in everyday life and on cultural behaviour, and thus reinforced the importance of locating religion as part of the seemingly mundane and the profane.

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