

In this report I will be initially describing, then analysing my visit to the Jamyang Buddhist Centre in Leeds. The report will draw upon the theme of Gender and will explore the power relations regarding the sexes in this particular place of worship, investigating the overall significance of gender in Buddhist practice. My key arguments and topics of investigation include, the role of women in Buddhism and the position of Buddhists in society as a whole.

Prior to visiting the Jamyang Buddhist centre in Leeds, my main aims entailed investigating the Buddhist way of life in modern day Britain and observing the gender roles in their everyday practice; through carrying out this visit I was eager to gain insight into their teachings as from previously studying aspects of Buddhism I was intrigued to see what differed from learning about a religion in theory, to experiencing and immersing myself in the Buddhist practices in the physical world. After all, “Religion isn’t lived in text books; it is performed experienced and developed by living individuals and communities. Religions are not static” (Gregg, 2015, pg.3) signifying the importance of experiencing religions rather than passively reading about their traditions. Equally Gregg claims, “As soon as we are studying religion in the field we become aware of many more aspects of complexity”, (Gregg, 2015, pg.3) once again highlighting the importance of the visit I was about to undertake.

With the visit arranged, I felt it would be appropriate and useful to explore the context of the Buddhism in Leeds, as this would give me the opportunity to gain insight into its origins and how centres such as this were established. The Jamyang Buddhist centre are affiliated to the foundation of the Mahayana Tradition, which is associated with the Gelugpa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism and from this starting point I began to research into the Buddhist tradition and its place in the UK. The 2011 census observed the key faith communities in Leeds and revealed that there were 2272 Buddhists in the city and that this community is concentrated, with ‘25% of all Buddhists in the city living in just three wards; 10.9% in Hyde Park & Woodhouse; 8.9% in City & Hunslet and 5.3% in Chapel Allerton’, showing the close proximity of Buddhist communities in Leeds. Earlier Census’s such in 2001 revealed that there were in fact 151,816 Buddhists in Britain on the whole, and proposed that this group was on the rise, with almost every Buddhist tradition being represented in some form in Britain.

Contacting the Buddhist centre was carried out with ease due to their approachable website and option to leave a message directly on there, meaning the initial step of contact was made less daunting, indicative of the welcoming nature of this centre. I initially left a message explaining the intentions of my visit and within a few days I received a friendly email

offering us dates on which we were welcome. The centres openness was initially surprising as I expected that there may be further questions asked however, it only served to further emphasise their eagerness to welcome all people, whether you were religious or not- highlighting the accepting morals of the religion. The method chosen to gather information was participant observation which according to Kathleen M. DeWalt includes ‘active looking and listening, improving memory, informal interviewing, writing detailed field notes and perhaps most importantly, patience’ (DeWalt, 2011, pg. 22) Which I took on board and closely followed during the visit. Equally, she claims that participant observation is a method in which a researcher takes part in the ‘daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning explicit and tacit aspects of their routine and culture’ (DeWalt, 2011, pg.22) All of which were vital in my research, as the main goal was to understand the true nature of the practices and immerse myself within them. Participant observation is said to be “accepted almost universally as the central and defining method of research” as it is “a way of approaching the fieldwork experience, and gaining understanding of the most fundamental processes of social life” (DeWalt, 2011, pg.22) I therefore selected this method as it gave me the opportunity to witness Buddhist practice in a natural way and gain insight into the religion on a deeper level, if I had merely observed and failed to get involved I feel I would have lacked in deep understanding.

The visit consisted of observing, listening and taking part in the particular practice titled: ‘Discovering Buddhism and the wisdom of emptiness’ which was an hour and a half session, prior to the practice I took this opportunity to ask questions regarding the building’s premises and its history. The Jamyang Buddhist centre is currently being rented as at the previous building many people had expressed they felt unsafe when leaving on a night therefore they now rent an office space in park square. They have adapted and made the office space into a place of worship which inevitably shows the flexibility of the religion and its adaptable nature, moving to cater for its followers cultivating a relaxed and safe environment. outside the Buddhist centre the appearance was ordinary; at first glance it took a few moments to locate the centre as it was on a row with different businesses and shops; this therefore a physical representation of how the religion fits in seamlessly with everyday life. Although the outside of the building had an office appearance, it was vastly different on the inside. For instance, a shrine with Gold Buddha statues was prominent, vivid colours illuminated each corner of the room, with shelves of books and patterned rugs present also. My initial thoughts regarding this were that although Buddhism may not be the central religion in Britain, their

traditions and aesthetic appearance is always preserved showing the resilience of the tradition. The contrast between the exterior and interior exposes how the tradition fits into modern society, equally the rented space was described to be temporary, therefore may be indicative of their lack of substantial funds to set up a permanent space.

On the day of the visit there were minimal worshippers which meant I had the opportunity to gain real insight into the individual people who visited, and I had the opportunity to partner up and therefore gain deeper insight into the individuals thoughts. I talked to three men all from different backgrounds who practiced meditation here on a Friday night to settle their thoughts and gain deeper understanding into Buddhist traditions; the different types of people visiting propose the openness of this Buddhist group and its welcoming nature of all of society. Equally the leader who greeted me took my hand- showing an immediate display of kindness- and advised us where to leave our bags offering us tea and biscuits, this therefore establishing an initial welcoming tone which was mirrored throughout the whole visit. When further examining the people, it is evident that the religion is diverse with all age ranges welcome from young to the elderly; for instance, one individual who stood out was a woman who was on her way home from work, dressed in clothes suitable for an office environment, as this proposes that the Buddhist practice fit in with modern day hectic schedules and it is accessible and open, further showing practice is a part of their lives; it is an integral element and not separate. Equally many young adults were present which made me consider whether people in general may latch onto the religion of Buddhism as it is in line with rising cultural trends of 'mindfulness and meditation', meaning I questioned whether individuals in Britain who follow the religion are wholly committed to practice, however at the Jamyang centre all the followers seemed highly committed and experienced. There was also an obvious sense of engagement of the religion with public life, for instance around the room were framed pictures of schools or different groups which had visited the centre, showing how the religion and society interact in a positive way and its ability to accept and open the publics eyes to their religion and way of life.

Whilst carrying out the fieldwork, my main theme of investigation was gender and the power dynamics between male and female worshippers and what i witnessed at the centre was very much in line with material from academic works. For instance, Diana Paul argues that "traditional Buddhist attitudes toward women as inferior reflect a view of women as temptress of evil incarnate" however today "women desire equal status and full participation in religion" (Paul, 1985, pg.) Rita Gross's views interconnect with Paul as she states that

today “Buddhist literature contains accounts of highly admired generous lay women” and mentions “equal opportunity” “large scale involvement of Lay women in Buddhist meditation “. (Gross, 1999, pg. 285) These concepts were largely reflected in the Jamyang centre, for instance the most prominent example of this was the fact that the leader taking the session was female- exposing of the rising role and importance of women in Buddhism. Equally, Richard H. Robinson proposes that “Reforms have integrated Western values into Buddhist practice. These include the increasing role played by women in running Buddhist organisations and by laity in practicing and teaching meditation” (Robinson, 1997, pg. 304) reflecting this same concept of empowered females in Buddhism who possess agency and the authority to lead practice due to Western values regarding gender equality. The leader who greeted us talked us through an image of a female positioned with her leg out, which was said to represent strength, passion and energy and is evidently an example that there are in fact robust female figures in Buddhism, thus further supporting the academic works. The fact that all who were meditating sat on rugs located on the floor, is equally representative of the power structures within the religion and equal opportunities for both Genders.

The method of participant observation was highly successful as it allowed for deep exploration of the practices of Buddhist traditions and meditation, whilst at the same time the opportunity to stand back, and carefully observe. The advantages to participant observation include grasping small details and interacting with people to gain personal insight into their reasons for practicing Buddhist traditions. If a different method had been chosen the outcome would have been vastly different, for instance if an approach which didn't entail getting involved had been used, the knowledge gained regarding meditation wouldn't have been as deep and significant as in this instance I feel my knowledge came from experience. The method of taking notes whilst participating was equally successful as is allowed for intricate observations to be recorded; however debatably this was also a hinderance as at times full dedication couldn't be applied as the act of writing was partly a distracting task, therefore if I were to undertake this task again I may record the notes after the visit. Equally, on reflection I would ask more in-depth questions to gain more insight into particular practices and the history of the centre.

This report has examined the role of Buddhism in British society and explored the theme of gender. Evidently, in the modern day the female holds a significant place in practice with mutual support for everyone present. The most significant aspect which I will take away from

this visit was how Buddhist teachings relate to everyday life, whether you are a part of the Buddhist religion or not. For instance, the concepts of impermanence regarding clinging and craving to materialistic aspects was covered which I feel is a prominent issue modern society, therefore the leaders statement that 'everyone can take something from this session' was evidently true. The experience not only met but exceeded my expectations, it was a valuable experience with my initial assumptions being reflected however, many aspects surprised me such as the wide scope of individuals and lives all intertwined in one place to practice.

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