Learning the Self and Others with the Dharma

Brandon Tran ’18

“My Buddhist Childhood” – Venerable Master Hsing Yun

Back at home, offerings of sandalwood incense, candlelight, fruits, flowers, and water would be made to the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, and my ancestors every full and new moon of the lunar month. The day before making the offerings, I made sure I cleaned the incense censer, wiped down the statues and plaques, and swept all the dust down. As a family, we made the offerings, not exactly knowing why, but did so in following the tradition that was passed down from our ancestors. In addition to making the offerings, I would stand in front of the over-six-foot-tall altar reciting a variety of Buddhist mantras and sutras. Doing so, I caught the attention of my family members who became very worried.

The combination of the time I devoted to attending weekly services, making sure the altar was cleaned and fresh fruits were purchased, and reciting Buddhist scriptures at home, made family members question my future. “Omitofo shifu,” I was sarcastically greeted by family members, using the greeting used for monks. Different family members, including my parents, raised all sorts of questions and remarks: “Will you become a monk?” “What do you plan on doing in the future?” “Do not go to the temple too much, I am worried.” I could not help but just say “no” to all of it, alleviating their stress for a short term – until they saw me again partaking in such activities.

Now that I am in college, my family members have stopped worrying for the most part. And my relationship to Buddhism has become more than just simply believing, like I did as a child. Today, I question and test out the central ideologies and teachings of Buddhism, and then evaluate how my practice from a young age has shaped me as a person. Given the language barrier that has prevented me from fully understanding the Buddhist texts that I chant, and the Dharma lectures that I have been listening to as a child, I have turned to online resources provided by Buddhist organizations for those who do not speak Chinese.
While surfing through the profiles and pages of Chinese Buddhist monastics and organizations, I came across a certain monastic’s Facebook profile that featured hundreds of pictures of different activities under one roof. I identified many of the different activities, ranging from the Chinese and Indian cultural occasions to the more spiritual and ritualistic events, such as the Bathing the Buddha Ceremony. What seemed unfamiliar were the different faces of people featured in the pictures. Women in the pictures were dressed in Indian sarees, men in kurtas, and bald innocent-looking boys with distinct South Asian facial features in traditional Chinese Mahayana monastic robes. I shrieked in excitement, immediately realizing that these young boys were novice Buddhist monks.

As I continued to scroll through the albums, I noticed pictures portraying the novice monks engaged in all sorts of activities and language classes, including English. I promised myself to one day visit the school to contribute to the students’ learning, as well as to understand how Buddhism has shaped their lives. Without hesitation, my mouse hovered over the “Add Friend” icon and within a second, it transformed into “Friend Request Sent.” Within months of establishing the connection, I applied for the Sorensen Fellowship knowing exactly where I wanted to go.

Upon the confirmation of the fellowship and purchase of plane tickets, family members questioned my ultimate motive. “But why exactly are you going?” “Will you also shave your head?” Many misunderstood the true meaning and purpose of my journey across the world to a Buddhist temple, and fell back to worrying about whether I was once again considering becoming a Buddhist monastic. After following my longstanding custom of replying with a simple and direct “no,” I took off from Houston towards New Delhi, worry-free and excited to begin an adventure and journey that would involve teaching English while researching and learning more about Buddhism and the monastic community.

Buddhism Returning Home
The Fo Guang Shan Cultural and Educational Center was established on the outskirts of New Delhi in the early 2000s to help revitalize Buddhism in India. This way of life attracted millions of practitioners in what is now India dozens of centuries ago, but now only 0.8% of the Indian population recognize themselves as Buddhists.1 Fo Guang Shan is an international Chinese Mahayana Buddhist religious movement based in Taiwan. In order to promote Humanistic Buddhism, the founder, Venerable [a term for any fully ordained monk or nun] Master Hsing Yun, established the following principles:

1. Spread the Dharma (Buddha’s teachings) through culture;
2. Cultivate human talents through education;
3. Benefit society through philanthropy; and
4. Purify the mind through cultivation.2

Until 2010, the Center served solely as a public sanctuary to execute these principles by offering interested devotees a chance to learn about and practice Chinese culture as well as Buddhism, and perform charitable works as a group. In that year, under the order of Venerable Hui Xian, the Center acquired an additional new purpose, allowing young male children to officially join the Buddhist community, or sangha. Venerable Hui Xian, of Malaysian descent and ordained in 1996, is currently the abbot of the Fo Guang Shan Cultural and Educational Center, overseeing all processes at the Center. Five students, originating from remote villages in the state of Uttar Pradesh, received the 10 sramanera precepts in May 2011 [a sramanera is a male novice Buddhist monastic who cannot become fully ordained until the age of 20] and became the first cohort of sramaneras of the Fo Guang Shan Sramanera School. Today, the Center houses 54 sramaneras and continues to disseminate the Buddha’s wisdom and teachings to the people of India.

Located 20 minutes from the nearest train station, and 45 minutes by car from Central New Delhi, the premises of the Center stand clear from the world full of materials and chaos, and uphold simplicity, strict orders, and harmony. Marking this heavenly landmark are the dual swinging red gates with the Chinese characters, 佛光 [Buddha’s Light], boldly painted in bright yellow.

The gatekeeper, a man in his 50s or 60s, greets visitors with a pearly white smile, which starkly contrasts with his dark brown skin. With black, straight hair and always wearing a button-down long sleeve shirt with slacks, he is the first person anyone meets upon arrival. Upon hearing the honk from a vehicle at the gate, he unlatches the lock from the inside, forcefully swings the two doors wide open, and, smiling, bows with palms joined to welcome all guests.

A Second Father
A good father is a male figure who is a pillar of discipline and support. Daily, his work is often endless as he radiates love to his children. In the
context of the Center, Venerable Hui Xian is the fatherly figure. In addition to being the srāmanerās’ master and spiritual leader, Venerable Hui Xian acts as their second father. He exemplifies the characteristics of the perfect father, expressing and providing bountiful support, compassion, and wisdom to the srāmanerās.

“So when did they get braces on?” I questioned curiously, noticing about five students bear braces.

“A few months back,” replied Venerable Hui Xian. “Some devotees ask why I do not wait for four or five years so that they can get free treatment,” he continued, as I nodded my head in agreement. He explained that he decided to allow those who require orthodontic attention to receive proper care upon recommendation of a general dentist. “As a parent, you do not want to wait in order for children to get treated. I think in the same way here.”

Based on this conversation with Venerable Hui Xian, I learned of the enormous attention and care that Venerable Hui Xian emanates to the srāmanerās. He sets himself at the level of a parent, not wanting to wait for the students to receive care. In similar situations, when the novice monastics are ill, Venerable Hui Xian is quick to provide them with Chinese traditional medicine and treatments, such as acupuncture and massage.

Mindful of their childhood development, Venerable Hui Xian allows the srāmanerās to engage in leisure activities daily. Following days of heavy monsoon rainfall in August, the usually dry, yellow-green playing field was flooded on a Saturday. Fearing that the srāmanerās would get ill from playing in the rain and flood, the venerable masters and staff members would not allow students to play on the field for the hour following classes. On that day, noting the disappointment and questions of the students, Venerable Hui Xian allowed them to play for a period of time. Upon my return from touring the city, students were very excited and eager to share stories of playing a contact sport named Kabaddi in the rain and flood. In the Venerable’s view, he does not want to take away from the srāmanerās’ development as children.

Venerable Hui Xian clearly projects unconditional love and care towards the srāmanerās, treating them as his own children. Coming to the Center, I had not thought about the level of care the srāmanerās received from the abbot and other residing monastics and staff members. By observing the close care that the students receive, I became aware in practice of the Buddhist perspective of interdependence and interconnectedness that the venerable once explained to me. Venerable Hui Xian’s practice of unconditional love towards the srāmanerās promotes a learning experience for the srāmanerās so that one day they can also care for others in the same way.

Different, Yet Similar

The srāmanerās range in complexion from pale to dark. Their complexions are characteristic of the different states of India from which novice monks originate: Uttar Pradesh, the home of the Taj Mahal; Maharashtra, the home of the Buddhist Ajanta Caves; Tripura, the northeastern state of Theravada Buddhism; fish-focused West Bengal; and snowy-mountainous Jammu and Kashmir. From east to west India, distinct groups of students look different from others. While some have features of East Asians, others have features of Caucasians, and still others have features of the stereotypical Indian – thick, black eyebrows on a chocolate-brown complexion. While some novice monks are thin and others of average build, none are overweight in body size. The students range from eight to 19 years of age.

Along with great diversity in height, complexion, age, and facial features...
Despite the obvious diversity among students at Fo Guang Shang, the similarity of their daily lives can sometimes conceal their differences. It comes a range of personalities. Each novice monk brings to the monastery his own talents, skills, and questions, enlightening and inspiring others about the many easily accessible opportunities life offers to us daily. When evaluated closely, each individual sramanera remains distinct from all others.

Despite the obvious diversity among students at Fo Guang Shang, the similarity of their daily lives can sometimes conceal their differences. The schedule that all residing members follow is identical, one that leaves no room for any changes. An auspicious new day begins by the knocking of a wooden board (da ban) at 5:30 a.m. On Sundays to Fridays from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., students are immersed in their academic curricula designed to help them become well-rounded individuals. Subjects include, but are not limited to: English, Hindi, Mandarin Chinese, Pali, mathematics, history, environmental and biological sciences, and psychology.

The residing monastics and staff members, as well as hired academic teachers, and volunteering monastics and teachers, instruct the sramaneras. In addition to academic classes, the sramaneras also complete their daily chores, exercise, meditate, consume their three “medicinal meals”, and conduct chanting services.

As evident in the publication “The 3rd Diary of Novice Monk,” the aspirations of the sramaneras at the school provide “...hope for the revival of Buddhism in India” to the venerable masters of the Fo Guang Shan organization. According to Venerable Master Hsin Ting, the sixth abbot of Fo Guang Shan, with strong faith and the right perception, the sramaneras train and learn the Dharma diligently. Even when severe weather pervades, with temperatures as low as 0°C and as high as above 40°C, the students do daily chanting and bowing, attend classroom lectures, and conduct chores outdoors. Venerable Master Hsin Bao, the current abbot of Fo Guang Shan, mentions that the life of the sramaneras is not easy “...as they have to constantly practise and cultivate the Way whilst mindfully keeping to right thoughts in order to carve out a bright Bodhi path.”

With backs and clean, shaved heads turned towards you, it is hard to differentiate the sramaneras from each other. They all wear the same uniform – a smoke gray-colored, long-sleeved, button-up, collarless shirt with complementary extra baggy and long pants. The paper-thin and cottony-soft texture of the monastic outfit appears to be so comfortable that at times – many times – I wanted to ask for my own pair to wear. At the bottom of the pants, an elastic band wraps the excess material along the lower leg, above the ankle. When wind blows, the outfits skip along the beats of the wind, thin enough to allow the breeze to flow through to cool the body. Each sweat gland covered by the material appreciates the breeze of cool air after working nonstop in the above 40°C temperature of New Delhi.

There are exactly 108 outfits of this type, each sramanera having two pairs. Following the hour of roasting under the sun playing sports and activities, novice monks cleanse themselves and put on the pair that has been air-drying for exactly 24 hours. Following their cleansing processes, sramaneras wash the day’s outfit by hand, later...
attending dinner with 10 wrinkly fingers. Individually scrubbing their own outfits, students utilize a bucket of water with light soap. By dinner time, 54 soaking and dripping wet outfits hang from clothes hangers on a rack located adjacent to the bathrooms.

A Battle Between Friend and Teacher

My role as a volunteer teacher and researcher was challenged by another role I had – being a friend of the sramaneras. The small age gap that existed between me and the novice monks played a crucial role in the effectiveness of my duties and responsibilities as an instructor and researcher while there. Throughout my stay at the sravana school, I recalled a text message from Auntie Kim: “The novice monks have many rules they must obey so be friendly, goofy but never impolite...after all though younger than you...they are your si heng...older dharma teachers.”

At the beginning of each class that I taught, the sramaneras bowed with joined palms and greeted me with “Ji Xiang” [Auspicious Blessings], “Good Morning,” or “Good Afternoon.” With my permission, the students sat quietly, while thanking me by saying “Thank You,” or “Omitofo” [the Chinese pronunciation for Amitabha Buddha’s name]. This troubled me; I felt as if I were disrespecting them by having them bow to me. At the time, I felt my role as a layperson did not deserve the reverence of these sramaneras, my “older dharma teachers,” as my aunt had called them. In my view, their deep practice and cultivation of Buddhism were ranked much higher than my own, a layperson’s.

Interestingly and shockingly, when listening to the opinions of the novice monks I learned that many of these students felt unchallenged by their hired academic English instructors. The sramaneras complained of the slow pace that the hired academic English teachers followed. The students in the lower level classes were taught one chapter per month.

From my perspective, both of the hired English academic teachers focused too much on reading comprehension. Recognizing this, I, as the volunteer American English instructor, implemented more rigorous teaching lessons for my classes to further sharpen their skills in English. For all 54 students, for one month I assessed their understanding of basic English, from identifying nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. to writing complete sentences. For the next month, essay writing and speech giving were the two most important tasks I gave to students. Many students grumbled, sighed heavily, and required lots of time to think, not knowing what to write or say, but these were important steps through which students could more effectively learn the language.

Outside of the classroom, my role as an instructor, as I have mentioned, was complicated by my role as a friend. We danced to the song “Try Everything,” ate on Saturdays in a large circle on the grass, processed tofu, cooked, chanted and meditated, and played sports all together. It was perhaps through all this time that I spent working with the sramaneras that I saw them as friends as well as students. Unlike the other teachers, both academic and volunteer, I practically stepped into their shoes, doing the same things as they were. During their “weekend holiday” on Saturdays, even when other volunteer teachers came from Taiwan to provide them with a two-day summer camp, students would eagerly wait for me to join their respective circles for the meals. “Lao shi!” [teacher] they yelled, gesturing with their hands for me to sit next to them.

Upon seeing this, many of the other volunteer teachers wondered why so many students wanted me to join them in their meals. What was it about me that made me so popular among the novice monks? I laughed at their reactions. Students themselves could not even answer. I still do not know the answer myself. This personal experience of mine led me to ask: What was it that I did that was so special? What was it, exactly, that made me so popular among the novice monks?
connection that I built with the students allowed me to learn more about each one on a personal level. The one-on-one conversations that I had with students regarding their time there at the school were very inspirational and formative. Although my roles as a friend and an instructor/researcher were distinct, the interconnectedness of the two allowed me to have a richer experience than most other instructors. I was able to better relate and connect with the students on a more personal level.

As a participant in many of the different activities, I felt as if I were home. Because of the strict order and uniform temple procedures for all Fo Guang Shan centers worldwide, as well as the comfort of the atmosphere, I did not sense I was 9000+ miles away from the United States. Working closely with the members of the Center allowed me to immerse myself wholeheartedly in everything that I did. The one-on-one conversations that I had, games that I watched, dances that I coordinated, and lessons that I taught have all inspired me to continue to work with people of different socioeconomic backgrounds, and to always focus on the present and neither the past nor the future.

**Smiles**

Throughout my stay at the school, students, monastics, and staff members knew of my plan to become a dentist. Before my journey to India, I thought having a class session dedicated to learning about oral hygiene would be very important for the students. I spent months contacting different dentists and companies including Colgate, Oral-B, and Crest, asking for donations of toothbrushes, floss, and toothpaste. Though I was denied many times, a number of individuals agreed to donate supplies, often more than what I expected to collect. On the day of my journey, an entire suitcase full of two boxes of toothpaste, 70 toothbrushes, two boxes of floss, and a typodont [a teaching model of the teeth and gums] was at my side.

One morning at 8 a.m., I surprised all of the students with a presentation about oral hygiene. Sitting on the floor of the main shrine, students made jittery noises while keeping their eyes locked on the unfamiliar black luggage. The students watched clips I’d found online on the importance of brushing and flossing, how to brush, and how to floss. When shown how to floss, students glared at me, looking over each others’ heads; none of the sramaneras had ever been exposed to flossing. But when asked to come up to the front to show everyone how to brush using a toothbrush and the typodont, many of the sramaneras were eager to showcase their skills, raising their hands as high as possible.

Each student was presented with a toothbrush and a packet of floss. Students who had questions regarding their oral health stepped aside to speak with me. Many of the younger students had discolored and decayed molars, ranging in color from yellow to orange to black. The deep penetration that the bacteria had eaten through the enamel and dentin was vivid at the time of inspection.
I was only able to offer two pieces of advice: brush twice a day and avoid sweets. Other students, primarily the older ones, consulted me with pain in their gums. They told me about their bleeding gums when brushing, which at times scared them away from brushing their teeth. I explained that it could be due to the buildup of plaque and tartar, and the best solution was flossing at least once a day.

I was frustrated, wishing I had the credentials, skills, and equipment to perform the proper procedures to help them with their pains, and in turn to give them confidence, hope, healthier teeth, and whiter smiles. The giant smiles that each student radiated upon receiving their supplies and advice gave me even more confidence in and commitment to becoming a dentist.

I am glad I was able to introduce floss to the group of sramaneras. With individual packets of floss, and new toothbrushes replacing ones with dull bristles that were bent in all directions, I hoped that issues related to their gums would subside and students would have less vulnerability to cavities. I am satisfied knowing that at least the students were able to gain insights into the proper techniques of brushing and flossing, as well as their importance and benefits. As an aspiring dentist, I not only want to serve underserved communities in Texas, but also hope to provide care to the sramaneras at the Fo Guang Shan school in the future.

A Special Treatment

A few days into my teaching, I told the students a bit about me and my background, including my age. Inquisitive, the students asked about my birthday, and found out that it was the third of August. Days before my birthday, students reminded me of the upcoming date. I kept recalling that it was sramanera Cheng Liang’s birthday as well, having learned of it during one of the casual conversations I had with a group of the students. With a birthday buddy to share the day I became excited, yet did not expect anything to be celebrated, as I acknowledged I was living inside a temple.

On the third of August, the community of monastics and teachers wished me a happy birthday throughout the morning, all the while continuing the daily routine. In the extremely humid afternoon following classes, all sramaneras gathered in the breezeway at 4 PM to enjoy fruit popsicles and chocolate bars. Meanwhile, Venerable Hui Xian announced that it was my birthday and led the group in singing “Happy Birthday.” I felt embarrassed, as I was told that monastics do not celebrate their own birthdays. Why did I deserve it when they do not? Before singing my name out loud, I looked around for Cheng Liang, attempting to share the spotlight with him.

In the late evening around 10 o’clock, jiao Shih, a staff member of the center, returned and jokingly asked out loud if there was a birthday. In my peripheral vision, I noticed two pairs of eyes on me, one of a sramanera and the other of jiao Shih. I was only able to imagine the two smiling real big, only to see me shying away. Unresponsive, I kept to my task in the office and did not bother to acknowledge the question, because I did not want the occasion to be a big deal.

Soon after, I went into the small kitchen of the main complex to refill my water bottle and spent some time smelling essential oils with Venerable Hui Xian. Midway, the Venerable asked if I was ready for the surprise. Nibbling on my Camelback bottle, I hesitantly laughed and replied yes, knowing that a cake was coming – I had already been warned in the middle of classes by Venerable Hui Xian. Excited to be joined by a group of the senior sramaneras, venerable masters, and residing staff members, I skipped up the stairs and back to the office to grab my DSLR camera.

On my way back, the sramaneras swamped the dining table. Anxious and nervous, I was hoping it was nothing too serious and big. I reached the pack and saw two big white boxes opened to chocolate-brown desserts on the dining table. I gasped. One was oddly shaped and flat; the other was round and looked quite normal. Instead of consuming both, as one seemed large enough, I suggested we only have oneconsuming both, as one seemed large enough, I suggested we only have one. We chose the dessert that was flat, oddly shaped, and contained fractures and cracks on its outermost layer. The once round and tall chocolate cheesecake was all melted and flat due to the heat. Still, I remarked that it was beautiful and looked very good. I felt so honored there was absolutely no room to be unthankful.
I went to bed later that night wondering why monastics do not celebrate their birthdays. How did the sramaneras feel seeing the entire group celebrate my birthday when they do not get to celebrate theirs? I was puzzled, yet honored. At least I was able to share the celebrations and its delicacies with all of them.

**Findings**

What had first appeared to be cruel essay writing and speech giving assignments allowed my students, in the end, to reflect on their own lives as Buddhist novice monks. In turn, I was able to discover much of what I now know about the personal lives of the sramaneras.

A large percentage of the students come from Uttar Pradesh, a state of India neighboring New Delhi. These students and their families became aware of the sramanera school primarily due to an organization called Youth Buddhist Society (YBS). According to the organization’s website, “Youth Buddhist Society is a volunteer, non-governmental, non-sectarian, non-profit, non-political people’s development movement based on engaged Buddhism established in 1986 in Sankisa, Uttar Pradesh – India. YBS has brought about grass root initiative, involvement and development of mind among thousand of villagers and human race in India.”

As I was taking the honorable seat next to Venerable Hui Xian, the “Happy Birthday” song was again sung by the glorious and divine voices of the venerable masters, sramaneras and staff members. The Venerable Masters Hui Xian and Hui Hu sang “Happy Birthday” to me in Cantonese, which turned out to be a laughing situation – since I did not know the Cantonese lyrics and embarrassingly could not follow along.

Before grabbing the knife to cut the cake, Venerable Hui Xian instructed me to join my palms and make vows to make the world more peaceful and for my academic and professional goals to be met. Nervous, I did not know what to do or say. After much persistence, I took a deep breath, exhaled, closed my eyes, joined my two sweaty palms, and whispered my vows. I turned towards Venerable Hui Xian to thank him and wished him and the community happiness and long lives. He laughed and joked about not wanting a long life as it meant more suffering. Finally, the obviously melted chocolate cake, jokingly referred to by Venerable Hui Xian as the “yat peck yeh” (Cantonese for “pile of feces”), was cut and served, followed by seconds.

Concluding the surprise, Venerable Hui Xian thanked me for giving the monastics and staff members a chance to enjoy such a delicacy, whereupon I laughed and thanked them for providing me such a heartwarming occasion. Before retiring for the night, Venerable Hui Xian wished me all the best and reminded me that the next day would still be a normal day, that the sun rises from the east and sets in the west. From this occasion, I was able to realize the power of humor and giving. From one single cake, the power of happiness was multiplied across all participants.

I went to bed later that night wondering why monastics do not celebrate their birthdays. How did the sramaneras feel seeing the entire group celebrate my birthday when they do not get to celebrate theirs? I was puzzled, yet honored. At least I was able to share the celebrations and its delicacies with all of them.
In fact, students in the sramanera school today who were once part of the villages in Uttar Pradesh have lineages tracing back to the Shakya Clan, a Vedic clan lasting from 1750-500 BCE to which Shakyamuni Buddha belonged. Other students from Ladakh, Tripura, and Maharashtra discovered the sramanera school through family members and friends, all coming for more hope in their lives and to revitalize Buddhism in India.

In addition to spending many hours dedicated to their education, students are also assigned duties and responsibilities. The sramaneras expressed that they found these responsibilities and duties a learning experience, enhancing their lives morally and ethically. The daily work that the sramaneras are required to complete make them feel more responsible for their own actions and for helping others. By fulfilling their tasks and duties, they better identify as a monastic rather than a layperson, as back home in their villages, there were no motives or targets in life that propelled them. Coming here, they have the opportunity to develop their skills and formulate larger goals for helping to propagate the Buddha’s teachings.

Being a Buddhist sramanera has changed the lives of each of them dramatically. In addition to large changes such as developing responsibility and formulating motives, targets, and goals in life, these individuals have changed in the subtlest ways. Following strict rules and guidance, they feel as if their lives are more ordered. Unable to drink, steal, kill, have a partner, dance, wear casual clothing, and lie, the sramaneras focus more on meditation and practicing compassion. Much like their lives as “village boys,” they joke – but they do not lie. They control their attitudes and behavior, instead of speaking very rudely without manners. When something that is wished for is not granted, they come to understand that it is not theirs, and allow those feelings to subside instead of becoming angry. These students have also learned how to sit straight, eat with proper manners, behave themselves when around professionals and guests, and face difficult people and situations while remaining soft and calm.

Hearing of these benefits and stories from the sramaneras themselves further strengthened my commitment to hopefully one day participate in a short-term monastic retreat. I hope that the benefits that the teachings have brought to the sramaneras will impact me in a similar way. When I asked the sramaneras where they see themselves 10 years from now, many responded that they hope to be propagating Buddhism in India. They hope to manage centers that provide education and cultural activities to the youth, all while providing a space to change the negative aspects of people to positive ones.

I hope that one day, these young sramaneras become the future leaders of Buddhism in India and the world. May they help the Buddhists in India reconnect with their faith, and may they help all sentient beings realize their Buddha nature.

In a Nutshell
Since my return to Brandeis, I have reflected both on what I have discovered about myself and on the impact I had on the students back at the school. Even though my responsibilities and routines were practically identical each day, I was able to learn and grow from my experience. Without a doubt, the internship led me to understand aspects of Buddhist monastic culture better than I could have expected.

Even though I still hold the practices of Buddhism dear to my heart in college, having co-founded the University’s Dharmic Prayer Space and leading weekly meditation and chanting meetings, I am faced with all sorts of stresses being back in an academic environment. The competition among students and the ubiquitous pressure to excel remain as the never-ending suffering faced by students as they all savagely vie for limited seats in professional schools. From my personal experience, I have been unable to wholeheartedly practice Buddhism as a result of these widely recognized expectations and responsibilities as a student. As I focus on learning the most that I can and achieving to the best of my ability – all while balancing work-study, extra-curriculars, and connections with friends – I often find myself distanced from my faith.

The different insights of the teachings of Buddhism that I acquired during my two month stay at the Fo Guang Shan Sramanera School have provided me with ways to combat the stress of the academic environment. The different
meditative practices and principles as explained in various sutras I learned have given me different perspectives on what I do as a student. I now see that I should not compare myself to others, as doing so will never lead me to happiness. When doing something, I must be single-minded and concentrate on that one thing. Taking this advice in, I have hope that my attitude and behavior as a student will be improved, yielding less or even no stress.

Furthermore, what I have learned about Buddhism has only deepened my interest in and commitment to studying and practicing the way of life.

However, I still wonder, “So in what ways has the internship changed me as a person and changed the people I worked with?” The internship has changed me in small and large ways. I now make my bed daily. I have a greater understanding of the Heart Sutra, a revered text in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. Being able to educate the novice monks gave me greater inspiration to one day serve underserved communities by providing comfort, confidence, and education about oral hygiene care as a dentist.

I hope that my time as a volunteer teacher has left the students with greater willingness to learn and practice English. I questioned the novice monks about what they would do if they decided to propagate the Dharma in a part of India that does not speak Hindi, and helped them realize that English would serve as an alternative language with which to communicate with the locals.

Just like Master Hsing Yun once said, “Live For Your Faith,” these sramaneras are living the Buddhist monastic way of life so that they may one day propagate the Dharma in order to revitalize the rich Buddhist history and culture in India. Together with the sramaneras, today I am living for my faith in the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha) and the efficacy of the Buddhist path. Constantly reminding myself of my faith in Buddhism, I come to understand the truth in the ideals of cause and effect, and karma. As we live each day with certain expectations and hopes, we may not always get what we desire or hope. However, the guidelines provided by Buddhism help alleviate any sorrow we may experience and keep moving on, without faltering.

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**Notes**

1. [http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_And_You/religion.aspx](http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_And_You/religion.aspx)