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Chùa Hoa Nghiêm: “Field Trip to Buddhist Temple”

by Danh Le

For my field trip assignment, I went to a Buddhist temple. The institution was called Hoa Nghiêm. The temple is based on the Mahayana school of Buddhism which is the dominant Buddhist school. The head monk was called Thích Kiên Khai. I arrived there at 7:30 am on September 20, 2015.

From the outside, the temple looked rectangular and big to me but I haven't been to a temple since I was around 5 years old, I barely remember anything. There was only one building but it had a pretty big backyard with some fairly large statues. Disclaimer: I am agnostic but my father is Buddhist while my mother is Christian. I could have gone to my mother's church but her church is very small with only one Father who tends to be very busy. My father's temple is also small, according to him, but it allowed my father to put a picture of my grandfather on one of the wall as part of their service so while I go, I could pay respect to my grandfather.

When I arrived, the place was very crowded. This is a Vietnamese temple so the major ethnicity there is Vietnamese. There were a few children but the dominant age group was probably around 40-60 years old. The number of male and female was about even. I saw about 8 monks but there could have been a lot more. The monks greeted everyone and everyone greeted them. The atmosphere was peaceful, calming, and very respectful. It's weird, there were about 100 people there but

it seemed fairly quiet? I say this as a question because there was a lot of footsteps and noises but for some reason, they seemed to drown in the back of the monks' prayers and respectful atmosphere. I didn't even notice the monks' prayers let alone the steps and small chatters until I started thinking about it. Before going to find my grandfather's picture, my father and I gave a few donations to the temple and so did many other people. The room with my grandfather's picture was a fairly quiet room. There were silent steps and no one talked. There was one monk in this room who repeated his prayers for a very long time. I had a hard time finding my grandfather because there were hundreds of pictures on that wall but I eventually found it and payed my respect with three bows. I asked my dad why we bowed three times and he said that each bows is for thanking. The first bow is to thanks the world, the second is to thanks our parents, and the third is to thanks everyone who had ever contributed some good in our lives. Even though my father's not a monk, I'll take his words for it. There were no chairs exactly but some mats. Most people just walk and used the ground to kneel and bow rather than sitting. When I was bowing, I was fairly comfortable being surrounded by people. The atmosphere at this point was very respectful and serious. I actually barely noticed anyone else because I was just thinking about my grandfather when I was paying my respect. It seemed to me that the community really knew each other well. My father knew some

people there and I got to talk to a few of them. Though I didn't get to ask them many questions I did figure out the type of people there. Everyone is kind and they often greet people they know. They seem to genuinely enjoy having small conversations with each other.

It was hard to talk to the monks with so many people trying to do the same but I did manage to ask a few questions. I asked simple questions first. I asked about the robes and their colors, the bald head, and the orange I received. I was told that the robes were what Buddha wore on his quest to reach Nirvana. The color orange actually has no real meaning but just happened to be the color at the time and has then become pretty much a norm. There are other colors to Buddhist robes but the color itself isn't important. The bald head simply represents the relinquish of material goods. Foods were being offered in the basement but there was no meat as part of Buddhism. I would have took some but the line was very long so my father and I decided to go. The monks gave everyone who came oranges. I wanted to know why so I asked. The orange is just another fruit they could of gave and it simply a sign of generosity and is basically wishing for good luck in another's future (roughly translated). I actually searched up what each offering means in Buddhism but I'll leave that for the next paragraph. I did ask the monks about the statues and their meanings but I had a hard time understanding the more complicated words they used so I had to look them up when I went home.

I did some small research when I got home about offerings, statues, and the whole Mahayana school of Buddhism. I remembered the big Buddha statue in the center of the temple and went online to see if I could find

it. Apparently this Buddha statue is called the Meditation Buddha which represents peace and calmness in one's live through meditation. There was another large statue in the backyard and it was of Kuan Yin, a female Chinese bodhisattva. Bodhisattvas are people who gave up the final step of Nirvana to help mankind reach Nirvana. They are not Buddha but are still worshipped and respected. Actually, the Bodhisattvas are very important in the Mahayana Buddhism ideal. The goal of Mahayana Buddhism is to become a bodhisattva and allow all beings to reach Nirvana. This is the opposite of Theravada Buddhism which emphasizes individual enlightenment. It should be noted that the goal of enlightenment of all beings is not out of kindness but out of the belief that all beings are inseparable from each other. The last statue I noticed was Ho Tai, the Prosperity Buddha. He is often mistook as Buddha but he is actually a famous Chinese monk that is similar to Santa Claus. He is known for rewarding children with gifts for leaning about Dharma. What I found very interesting are the offerings to Buddha. Even though most of the people at the temple gave money, it was more for helping the temple grow rather than being an offerings to Buddha. I did notice a few incense, candles, and fruits. An Incense is calming and represents the offering of our peace of mind. The candles are for offering the brightness of our mind and heart. Fruits are the puniest of all the offerings. I am sure many people heard of how an effort or work could bore fruit. This is the same idea. When a person offers fruit, it is meant to offer the fruition of our Buddhist practices rather than them being in vain. There are many more offerings and meaning behind the stances of Buddha statues but I'll leave those for a future visit. •

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