



**Doctoral School of  
Social Communication**

## **THESIS SUMMARY**

for the PhD dissertation entitled

**The Retreat as a Scene of Communication**

**Abilities and Problem Solving in a Buddhist Community**

by

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**Institute of Behavioral Sciences and Communication Theory**

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## **1. Research Antecedents and the Justification of the Topic**

Encounters between various cultures have been taking place for thousands of years; such encounters have included the emergence of major routes of commerce as well as centuries of colonization. Starting with the twentieth century, however, the globalization of the world is happening on an entirely new level. The trading of various goods has become ever more intensive in the last century and in the present day – including the trade of cultural goods. Access to such goods has changed significantly: while in the past reading literature from distant lands and viewing exotic works of art was primarily the prerogative of the upper class or of intellectuals, all this is accessible to far broader segments of society today. Accordingly, interest in Oriental inspiration has also increased, to which several additional factors have also contributed: on the one hand, a shattering of the exclusivity of prior major systems of interpretation (the religious worldview), the related processes of secularization and the proliferation of the scientific view of the world – and on the other hand, dissatisfaction with the emerging consumer society and the secular worldview. One outcome of this process has been for an increasing number of individuals of Western civilizations to become interested in Oriental thought.

Taking a broader view, the dissertation will thus examine the ways in which a set of viewpoints with Oriental roots is able to provide answers to the problems of Western individuals, and what kind of transformation it can or must undergo to match the way of thinking and lifestyle of the Western individual. My point of departure was that Buddhism is a religion (or philosophy) which is able to adapt to a given culture to such an extent as to make its understanding and acceptance possible. During my studies at the ELTE Program on Buddhist Philosophy and the History of the Buddhist Religion, it became clear to me that this sort of adaptation did, in fact, play out during the spread of the religion in Asia. The question thus occurred to me whether Buddhism is able to adapt to Western circumstances – and if it is, then how this adaptation plays out. Adaptation has several dimensions which are linked to one another. Such links include the notion that linguistic translation always involves cultural translation as well. Or for another question: what meanings do the ceremonies of a particular religion carry in another cultural medium, or whether the rules of a particular religion may be observed under differing circumstances.

Hungarian scientific literature is not particularly rich in its examination of Western Buddhism; previous efforts have focused primarily on studying the classical texts of Buddhist tradition. This field poses significant challenges also simply because of linguistic difficulties.

At the same time, Budapest is home to the only institute of Buddhist higher education in the region, as well as to a number of practicing communities, making the topic particularly interesting and relevant. The novelty of the dissertation lies in the fact that it approaches the subject matter from a unique perspective of the social sciences, wishing to contribute to the relevant scientific discourse from the area of communication theory and anthropology. In other words, it is not a work in the study of religion; the focus of the dissertation is on the question of how and to what extent Buddhist teaching may be acquired and used in Hungary to support everyday life. To that end, it examines the kinds of linguistic and cultural hindrances which may emerge as far as acceptance is concerned; the ways in which Buddhism – as a religion, philosophy, psychology or otherwise – is present in the lives of those practicing it; what part of Buddhism is attractive to them; and what opportunities the community – and, as one of its key programs, the retreat – offers to those practicing Buddhism to acquire the abilities to assist them in their everyday lives.

## 2. Methodology Applied

The dissertation takes an interdisciplinary approach. The participation theory of communication provides the major framework, which in itself may be considered a peripheral area of science insofar as it examines and considers (social) institutions such as language, culture, art, law, science, morality, religion, politics and the economy. In addition to the theory of communication, it was necessary to also utilize theories, approaches and research findings from fields such as the study of religion, sociology, cultural anthropology, linguistics and psychology/neurology. Because of the nature of the topic, certain philosophical considerations also had to be involved, especially from the fields of phenomenology and Buddhist philosophy.

The practical part of the research involved field work, which entailed participant observation at a Hungarian Buddhist micro-community as well as in-depth interviews with members of the community. The field work involved participation at four retreats (in the summer of 2014, the spring of 2015, the summer of 2015 and early in 2016) and fifteen in-depth interviews (one of which was conducted with the interpreter of the community). Interview subjects ranged in age from 30 to 65, and included seven males and eight females. Thirteen of them held higher education degrees recognized by the state; two had completed studies outside the state education system; and the majority of them worked in areas related to psychology, with the remainder working in other white-collar fields. One respondent lives in the surroundings of the capital, with the remainder residents of Budapest. Several of them had lived, or spent various amounts of time, abroad.

The dissertation focuses on various topics related to Buddhism which may be examined from a perspective of communication and with respect to various institutions, scenes and agents mentioned by the participation theory of communication. As this would otherwise apply to a number of fields, each broad in itself, it was necessary to reduce the scope of the dissertation to a certain extent. Narrowing the focus of research reflects, on the one hand, the field of interest of the researcher, and not the significance of the specific fields (provided any sort of rank-ordering would even be possible). On the other hand, there is an important underlying principle: each sub-topic is connected to understanding – whether linguistic understanding, understanding of religion or ceremonies, or scientific understanding etc. – and the application of knowledge, ethical principles or attitudes (etc.), obtained through understanding, in everyday life; this then links to the foundation of participation theory: problem solving. The discussion of these sub-topics, in every case, includes an overview of

research being conducted in the specific field, theories being applied, doubts and questions – however, these naturally are unable to cover the variety and volume of research being conducted in these areas. Instead, they will attempt to demonstrate the number of options available to someone wishing to study Buddhism in the context of the present day, and to point out the risks involved in such studies.

The dissertation is structured along the three main concepts of participation theory – institution, scene and agent – and reflects the direction of the approach to the topic, moving “from the outside in.” Following the introduction, the second part therefore discusses the various institutions, with the third part dealing with relevant scenes and the fourth part focusing on agents. Following the closing chapter, the texts of the practices of the community, interview questions and photographs taken during the field work are included as appendices.



### 3. Dissertation Findings

#### 3.1 Research Hypotheses

##### **Hypothesis H1:**

*The religion examined – Buddhism –, with certain limitations, possesses the resilience which may make it suitable to serve as the guiding principle in the life of Western (and, more specifically, Hungarian) individuals.*

To validate the hypothesis, I relied on three sub-hypotheses:

**H1a:** *Buddhist teaching does not demand exclusive affiliation – in the present age of a pluralistic society, this in itself may be attractive and makes it possible to reconcile it with other religions or perspectives.*

**H1b:** *The Western form of Buddhism, and within it especially the branch defining the practices of the community, makes it possible to practice various levels of commitment, involvement and various ways of practicing the religion (“religious in their own way”); this makes it reconcilable with modern, everyday life.*

**H1c:** *Linguistic and cultural boundaries make understanding and practice more difficult.*

**Hypothesis H2:** *Abilities obtained in the Buddhist community effectively support problem solving in everyday life.*

In validating the hypotheses, the following *institutions* of communication were discussed: religion, culture, language and science. For this, I relied primarily on literature related to the topic. In addition to institutions, the *scenes*, *agents* and the *abilities* of the agents were also examined. In the case of these, the literature plays a supporting role in addition to the observations collected through field work.

*Scenes* refer principally to retreats which I attended during the course of my research. More specifically, I paid special attention to the central spaces of the retreats – the *zendos* – which also served as sacral spaces. Scenes were described on the basis of participant observation.

The *agent* is, on the one hand, the community as such; the members of the community, who may be grouped in the following four categories, are also considered *agents*: the teacher (the leader of the retreat), the interpreter, members comprising the “core” and “ring”

members. Hypothesis H1 was further validated in connection with the agents: sub-hypothesis H1a in the case of the teacher, sub-hypothesis H1c in the case of the interpreter and sub-hypothesis H1b in the case of the members of the core and the ring. Agents were described on the basis of participant observation and in-depth interviews.

I endeavored to explore *abilities* obtained in the community primarily through in-depth interviews.

### **3.2 An Overview of the Dissertation**

In the dissertation, I have attempted to explore the following, along the conceptual lines of the institutions, scenes and agents of communication:

- what does Buddhism, the community and the retreat mean to the participants of a retreat of a Hungarian Buddhist community;
- how are participants able to utilize the abilities they acquire at the retreat in their everyday lives (in their private lives and in their work), and what types of conflicts do they potentially face;
- how well do they understand Buddhist teaching as transmitted in Hungarian or in English;
- how do they experience the sacral dimension of the retreat;
- and how does all of this fit within the framework of Western Buddhism.

To that end, I first reviewed certain approaches and definitions of several institutions such as culture, religion and language. I then described interpretations of Buddhism not-as-a-religion, examined the interest of various areas of science in Buddhism and introduced translation options for a number of Buddhist terms. I relied on classical and contemporary literature for the theoretical discussion. I conducted the practical component of my research at a Hungarian Buddhist micro-community, where the mother tongue of the teacher is Dutch; he holds retreats twice a year, conducting them in English. During my field work, I participated in two six-day retreats conducted by this teacher in the summer months; I also participated in two two-day retreats conducted by two other teachers (one Dutch and one of Vietnamese extraction living in the Netherlands).

The participation theory of communication proved to be the most appropriate communication theory for the research: it provides a theoretical framework in which the concept of communication is based on the concept of participation, and where the mutual sharing of the abilities of the agents is considered a necessary condition of problem solving.

Here, abilities is taken to include everything that is “utilized” for understanding: linguistic competences, our cultural background, our worldview, our theoretical knowledge about the particular subject, our knowledge derived from communicating with others and – insofar as the topic of the dissertation is concerned – convictions arrived at through, for instance, Buddhist teaching, ceremonies, meditations and practices. Because the composition, level and direction of each of these is different in the case of each agent, differences are to be expected in understanding as well. Nonetheless, there is a common platform: through communication, we are able to determine just what it is we mean by a particular concept.

I considered culture to be a system providing meaning, through which an individual acquires concepts, behavioral patterns and tools that they can use to function in the given society, and that they can use to produce meanings by relying on their cultural knowledge and abilities. From that point of departure, the question arises what an individual or community is to do with a set of viewpoints originating in a highly different culture: to what extent are they able to understand its concepts, and how are they able to create new meanings, adapt their values culturally and insert them into their everyday lives.

In my research, language appears as an institution of communication which plays an active role in thinking and in the representation and structuring of the world. Language is an institution: behind the individual speaker is a linguistic community with solid traditions and a community of lifestyle. Depending on the perspective, language may be considered one of the most rigid, or one of the most flexible, human institutions. I interpreted language using a moderate relativistic approach: that we are universal as far as our individual opportunities, cognitive resources or, on the whole, our thinking and the foundations of our world of feelings are concerned; even though there are differences between cultures and languages, these do not present ultimate obstacles to understanding.

Defining the concept of religion proved more difficult because of the topic of the dissertation. William James’ proved to be the most adequate approach. Instead of institutional religiousness, James places personal experience in the focus, and considers religion to be the emotions, actions and experiences the individual encounters in their solitude, as long as these can be grasped as being connected to the thing the individual considers to be divine.

### **3.3 Dissertation Findings**

#### ***3.3.1 The Institution of Language***

The research showed that respondents are aware of the limitations resulting from language (they are aware of the presence of re-interpretations stemming from such “multi-step” retransmission: the original language of the texts of Buddhism, Dutch as the mother tongue of the teacher, the English language of the teachings and interpretation); this does not, however, make it impossible for them to understand. They ascribe this, in part, to the notion that even though a knowledge of an Oriental language would allow them to obtain insight into additional layers of the meanings of the texts and expressions of Buddhism, the knowledge they are able to acquire in Hungarian or in English about Western Buddhism is sufficient for them in their personal lives. Additionally, they subscribe to the notion that knowledge may be transmitted not only on the level of words.

#### ***3.3.2 The Institution of Religion***

The research showed that while respondents do not typically consider Buddhism to be a religion – with most of them considering it more a philosophy of life, a psychology or a guidepost or guiding system which helps orient them in life – the majority of them (with one or two exceptions) may be considered religious or possessing a religious sentiment as defined by William James. Their approach may be described as autonomous religiousness, being “religious in their own way” or as spiritual interest or spiritual path-seeking.

#### ***3.3.3 The Institution of Science***

One of the attractions of Buddhism, and especially of Western Buddhism, is a relatively easy (when compared with other religions) reconcilability with a scientific view of the world. The overwhelming majority of the members of the community hold higher education degrees and are urban residents working either in a scientific field or some other intellectual or assistive field. Many of them work as psychologists, therapists or other assistive professionals, including the teacher and the interpreter of the community. In view of this, it comes as no surprise that reconcilability with rational thought is of importance to them.

### ***3.3.4 The Retreat as a Scene***

According to the findings of the research, the role of the retreat (in addition to the fact that participating in retreats is a condition of membership in the community) is to break away from the commotion of everyday life, to turn one's focus inwards, to quiet the mind, to increase empathy, to improve oneself and to "be present in the present." Participating in a retreat may be driven by curiosity, a desire to seek solutions to difficult situations in life, a need for recreation and the opportunity for practice within the community (and, in the case of those who have been members for a longer time, to meet other members of the community). All considered the existence of the community to be important; there were, however, differences in the extent to which individuals desired the support of the community for their own practices.

### ***3.3.5 Ceremonies and Rites***

The relationship of the members of the community to ceremonies and rites is ambivalent: they generally like or accept them – with the caveat that they do not necessarily experience their sacral nature (although there are examples of this as well), but more their emotional side and their role in the life of the individual and the community.

### ***3.3.6 The Community***

As far as the role and the significance of the community is concerned, the conclusion is that respondents experienced their membership in the community in several different ways. Participation may be described, in a broad sense, using the concepts of the "core" and the "ring;" there is no sharp dividing line between these, and in fact the community itself is currently undergoing change in this respect. One's opinion of the extent to which the community functions as a collective agent is connected in part to the level of the individual's involvement and commitment to the community, and in part to their expectations of the community. On the whole, the community treats membership fairly flexibly, which may certainly erode cohesion, but which may also make it easier to join the community. The teacher plays an important role in the life of the community: many members feel a connection to him on some level, but most of them generally believe that the community must be able to exist on its own. It was, however, proven unequivocally that the person of the teacher served as a major force of attraction at the retreats, as participants considered him a credible individual and one that they enjoy learning from. In view of the composition of the

community, the inclinations of the teacher toward psychology were seen as a distinct advantage.

### ***3.3.7 Abilities and Problem Solving***

The research showed that participants acquire abilities – from Buddhist teaching, in the community and through especially the retreats – that clearly support them in their problem solving. This holds true both for their private lives as well as for their professional work and workplace relationships. Buddhist teaching, above all, plays a defining role in everyday life when the principles and attitudes it represents gradually become a part of the individual’s way of thinking and support their decisions as internal drivers in certain situations. Respondents reported acquiring abilities through Buddhism which greatly influenced – and greatly influence – their human relationships: they are better able to place themselves in others’ positions, thereby becoming more tolerant, empathic and understanding. In addition, they acquired a higher level of self-awareness, becoming better able to cope with difficult situations and better able to manage conflict. Because they do not experience Buddhism as a religion, they do not see a conflict with potentially reconciling it with other religions. Although I did encounter examples of a stronger dual religious identity, the majority of respondents defined themselves primarily as belonging to one religion, and even this belonging represents a weaker connection. At the same time, they encounter few conflicts because of their Buddhism – primarily because they do not wish to force their own views on others.

### ***3.3.8 Connection to Western Buddhism***

Of the forms of Buddhism, the community follows “Applied Buddhism” or “Engaged Buddhism,” associated with Thich Nhat Hanh, which is closer to the way of thinking of Western individuals. By their own admission, respondents are able to connect to Western Buddhism, and understand very well that the Buddhism of Asian individuals is far more institutionalized and is more religious in a classical sense. They do not believe it is possible to realize this in the West, but they do believe that the Western form is appropriate to serve as a set of guiding principles in their everyday lives, as this is the only form that is reconcilable with their lifestyles. They themselves practice in different ways and to different degrees, ranging from daily meditation or listening to teachings daily, to participating really only in the

retreats and to trying to realize, as best as they can, the principles involved in the five practices of taking refuge in their everyday lives.

### **3.4 Summary of Findings**

The research has validated the original hypotheses.

1. Buddhism – as “Applied Buddhism” or “Engaged Buddhism” – possesses the resilience which makes it possible for Western individuals to accept and internalize it, and may therefore make it appropriate to serve as the guiding principle in the life of the individual. Western Buddhism, and more specifically “Applied Buddhism,” makes it possible for the individual to connect and become involved to various degrees and depths; the fact that it does not demand exclusive affiliation (it allows for dual religious identity) also serves as an attraction. Additionally, this form of the religion may be reconciled with everyday life. While lacking a knowledge of Oriental languages hinders the understanding of original Buddhist teaching, and even though some meaning is lost in the translation of teachings held in the English language (with additional meanings created along the way), this does not obstruct internalization.

2. It was confirmed that respondents’ abilities obtained in the community effectively support problem solving in everyday life. One central space for the acquisition of these abilities is the retreat, where the acquisition and expansion of these abilities is fairly intense: through teachings, community sharing, various meditations and ceremonies and informal conversations. Additionally, quiet periods equally – just as other programs – serve as fora for acquiring abilities. All respondents described a development of their problem solving and conflict management skills as a result of Buddhist practices. On the whole, it may be concluded that participation in the community and Buddhist practices contribute to the development of the individual’s self-awareness, to a deepening of their human relationships and generally to an improvement of their quality of life.

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## **5. The Author's Own Publications in the Field**

### **5.1 Publications in Hungarian**

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### **5.2 Publications in English**

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