

Project Title

Capital and Community: A Study of Silence and Interaction in Zen Buddhist Centers in New York

Description of the Project

Many of us are aware of the powerful effects that language has on our lives, and have at least a basic understanding of how speaking a similar language helps to create lasting social bonds. My research, however, points to a much less studied area of language and community. My core concern is with silence; how silence may both shape a community just as spoken language may, and how silence may influence an individual's relationship with society.

This gap in knowledge regarding the effects of silence has been researched in other settings, such as with the Western Apache (Basso 1970) and the practices of the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center (CMIC) Zen organization (Cadge 2007). In CMIC, Cadge discovered that previously perceived "individual" silent practice and worship may carry a social linking effect that works to glue together a group. What I intend to pursue is a contemporary view of how silence may provide the tools to build a community separate to a fast-moving mainstream American society. Therefore, my research focuses on a Brooklyn Zen center, as well as its accompanying Zen Mountain Monastery in the upper New York Mountains (Mount Temper, NY).

Zen is a perfect entrance into understanding silence, as much of its practice revolves around long hours of meditation, yet an entire community is built. The community develops through specific roles and responsibilities taking place at the monastery, such as setting/fluffing up the sitting cushions, lighting the incense sticks, preparing the meeting room, and sweeping/cleaning the outer and inner buildings. Other activities such as chanting constitute group work; and ritual renaming (where one sheds their old name, and in turn old life, to become a monk) solidifies this intentional community by creating an identity that exists solely within the Zen Center.

Silent meditation, still, is the most practiced function of any Zen center. So, in such a site where their main practice involves long hours of silent sitting, I intend to pursue the following research questions: (i) What sorts of interaction precedes and follows formal meditation? (ii) What effect does said interaction have on each individual's sense of community? (iii) How is social and cultural capital built in a community with mostly silent practice? (iv) How does silence shape social/spiritual identity as Zen practitioners? (v) How do silence and the expectations for roles and responsibilities go into building an intentional community? And (vi) How, to the

practitioners, is silence symbolic and meaningful as a form of communication? For my ANTH 414 semester project in fall 2018, I conducted over 15 hours of fieldwork/preliminary ethnographic research at the Brooklyn Zen Center. This summer project is meant to be an extension of my preliminary research. To conduct this research, I will mainly use participant observation, such as sitting with the practitioners during zazen (silent sitting), chanting, communicating during tea breaks and fulfilling monastery roles such as cleaning. These sessions will last around 5 hours each. I will take field notes as appropriate during and after these interactions, and conduct semi-structured interviews among practitioners of different levels, such as monks (full and part-time), regular attendees, and infrequent/new practitioners. My bi-weekly trips to the Brooklyn Monastery will alternate between weekend morning visits and weekday night visits, as the weekends attract many members, while the weekdays attract only seasoned attendees.

As the Zen Mountain Monastery is a fully autonomous community complete with local jobs/agriculture to sustain themselves, I believe it is imperative to spend ample time with them in order to fully grasp how silence builds this intentional community. Participant observation will mean becoming a fully functioning member of the site for two weeks, participating in their sits and taking on jobs such as gardening, cooking, and cleaning. I will take field notes and seek to conduct semi-structured interviews here, as well.

My proposal for human subjects approval is currently in development under IRB-FY18-19-1221.

Purposes For Which The Funds Will Be Used

This will be a three-month long research project involving frequent travel to and from Brooklyn and the upper state mountains. Expenses will mostly revolve around travel costs, but will also include donations to the two field site Zen centers. The first month (June 2019) will consist of bi-weekly travel to the Brooklyn monastery. Additionally, I will donate the suggested \$5 (stated on their donation box) on each visit. This is meant to be at once a form of reciprocity between me as the researcher and the Zen Center, and part of the expected practice of any visitor of the monastery. Bigel funding during this first month of research will go toward these donations, as well as travel to and from Brooklyn, research supplies, and food.

During the second month (July 2019), I intend to lodge for two weeks at the Mountain Monastery (Mount Temper, NY). Bigel funding will go toward my stay at the monastery which will include housing and food costs.

The third month (August 2019) will consist of follow-up trips to the Brooklyn monastery, and non-lodging visits to the Zen Mountain Monastery. I intend to use this

time to conduct follow-up interviews and pursue newfound relationships with the data (as this research will be conducted using ground-up methodology). To cover such a large amount of expenses, I am requesting the full amount of the Bigel Grant. This project, due to its scope, will involve a considerable time commitment, which will prevent me from otherwise working a summer job. Any remaining funds would offset the need for summer work.

Expected Project Outcomes

By spending such deep and frequent time with the practitioners, I expect to discover the ways in which their community develops and is maintained through interactions that involve silence, ritual language (such as chanting), embodied action, and informal communication. I will decipher what meanings people give/attach to silence (especially during meditations) and how the people believe their own lives shift through their practices. I will also examine how practitioners' ideas of belonging might relate to practices of silence and meditation. I expect to see how silence is a shaper of community and of personal identity, and how social and cultural capital is created in such a community where little speaking is involved. Through this study, I will also explore the social and spiritual meanings of silence. In addition, I will be contributing to the knowledge of the MSU community by presenting these findings at the Anthropology Department Welcome Event when I return to campus in September 2019. Finally, this project will contribute to my own training as a new anthropologist and will prepare me for applying to graduate programs in anthropology.

References

- Basso, Keith. 1970. "'To Give Up On Words': Silence in Western Apache Culture."
Southwestern Journal of Anthropology 26 (3): 213-30.
- Cadge, Wendy. 2007. "Reflections on 'Habits,' Buddhism in America, and Religious Individualism." *Sociology of Religion*, 2: 201-205.

Budget

Supplies

Digital audio recorder: Sony 4GB PX Series MP3 Digital Voice IC Recorder = \$46
AAA batteries = \$17

June 2019: Brooklyn Monastery site

Travel: \$20 (round trip bus and subway fare) biweekly x 4 weeks = \$160

Food: \$35 per day biweekly x 4 weeks = \$280

Monastery donations: \$5 per visit biweekly x 4 weeks = \$40

July 2019: Mountain Monastery site

Travel: = \$45 Round trip

Food: Included with lodging fee

Lodging for two-week stay: \$600

Monastery donations: Included in lodging fee

August 2019: Both sites, for follow-up as needed

Travel:

Brooklyn: \$20 (round trip bus and subway fare) x 2 visits = \$80

Mountain Monastery: \$45 (round trip) x 2 visits = \$180

Food: \$35 per day x 4 total visits = \$140

Monastery donations: \$5 x 4 total visits = \$20

Balance to offset the need for part-time summer work: \$892

TOTAL REQUESTED: \$2500