

Paṭipatti

Outpost Buddhism: Vietnamese Buddhists in Halifax

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Abstract

The study of Buddhism in the Canadian context is in a nascent phase, so it is not surprising that most studies focus on the major urban areas, especially Montréal, Toronto and Vancouver. Studies that look at Buddhism as practiced by ethnically homogenous groups have all been on communities that are big enough to establish temples and organisations to sustain their religious needs. This paper addresses this imbalance by considering how Vietnamese Buddhists approach their practice in Halifax, where the community is too small to sustain an organisation, services or a religious space. It looks at the current Buddhist institutions in Halifax and how they have not met the needs of the Vietnamese community, and then goes on to explore the strategies employed to compensate for the lack of a temple of their own.

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In 2011, the Vietnamese Association of Nova Scotia (hereafter VANS) marked its anniversary, along with the 30th anniversary of the “Boat People” coming to Halifax.² They celebrated the occasion by organising a small exhibition at Pier 21 (the immigration museum in Halifax) and by a gala dinner. To this they invited dignitaries, politicians, members of the community and the numerous sponsors who brought them to Halifax after South Vietnam was defeated in 1975. Yet there has been little institutional or organisational development in the Vietnamese community in Halifax since VANS was founded in October 1979. What is noticeably absent are any Vietnamese religious institutions, particularly Buddhist ones. This is in stark contrast to other urban centres in Canada, where Buddhist temples were among the first community institutions to be built by Vietnamese refugees, and play a central role in sustaining community solidarity. Indeed, as McLellan and White note, Vietnamese Buddhists have been particularly successful at mobilising social capital through their religious institutions, especially compared to other Indochinese communities in Canada (McLellan and White 2005, 238). The Vietnamese Buddhists have been so successful that today they comprise a proportionally large piece of the Buddhist landscape in Canada.

The reason there is no Vietnamese Buddhist temple in Halifax is not difficult to divine: the population base – approximately 500 people, not all of whom are Buddhist – is not sufficient to build and support a temple. This essay is, therefore, not an attempt to answer why there is no Buddhist space for Vietnamese, but rather, it asks: what do Buddhists, and especially those associated with a particular ethnic community, do in the absence of resources to set up temples and attract monastics? This question will be considered first by describing the context of the Vietnamese in Canada, and particularly in Halifax; secondly, by describing both past attempts to establish a temple, and current Buddhist institutions that could, but do not, act as viable centres to serve the religious needs of Vietnamese Buddhists. Discussion will conclude with a look at the strategies employed to compensate for the lack of a suitable Buddhist institution in Halifax.

The Vietnamese in Halifax

Vietnamese first came to Canada as early as the 1950s as students, but the majority came as refugees, starting in 1975, when South Vietnam was taken over by the Communist North.³ The migration accelerated between 1979-1980, with the arrival of the “Boat People”. The situation for South Vietnamese worsened to the point that 2 million Indochinese⁴ resettled beyond the region between 1975 and 1997 (Buckley 2008, 27), with the height of the exodus being 1978-1979. The outpouring of Vietnamese led

to a humanitarian crisis, with neighbouring countries unable to deal with the large numbers. Canada's response was to make significant alterations to immigration and refugee policies in order to maximise the number of people who could be accepted. Canada took slightly more than 10% of all refugees, resettling a total of 74 000, and winning recognition from the United Nations Human Rights Council by being granted a Nansen Medal in 1986 (Buckley 2008, 27). The numbers of refugees that the Canadian government declared it would accept rose from 5 000 in 1979 up to 50 000 later that year, and 60 000 by 1980, due to the political courage of Prime Minister Joe Clark and Flora MacDonald, Minister of Foreign Affairs. This was accomplished by a sponsorship matching programme that allowed for non-governmental organisations – primarily faith based – to sponsor individuals and families. In total, over half of the refugees were sponsored privately (Buckley 2008, 29). As a result,

In Canada, 38.8% of the 1979-1980 arrivals resettled in non-metropolitan areas, due to both private and public sponsorship. Sponsorship offers came from everywhere in Canada, even from places with no tradition of immigration and located far from the three Canadian economic poles (Vancouver, Toronto and Montréal). (Lavoie 1989, 52)

Consequently, the subsequent years saw a large secondary movement of Vietnamese to the larger urban areas, especially Montréal and Toronto. Nonetheless, there were a few who remained in smaller centres (Lavoie 1989, 63-64).

Halifax was not one of the major points of settlement for the Vietnamese refugees. By 1980, around 1 000 Indochinese refugees settled in Nova Scotia, with 397 being ethnic Vietnamese, 399 ethnic Chinese, and the remainder Lao and Khmer (Boyd 1981, 22-3). Most of these settled in Nova Scotia because they already had family members there, were placed by the government, or because they were sponsored by a church. Since that time there has been no major increase in the number of Vietnamese in Halifax. Instead, there has probably been a decrease in population. According to the 1996 census there were 515 Vietnamese in Halifax (Pfeifer, n.d.), and the 2001 census indicated that there were roughly 800 in all of Nova Scotia (Lindsay 2007, 10).⁵ Presumably it was a difficult place in which to settle, due to the very small Asian population and few resources in Halifax at the time.

The small Vietnamese population in Halifax means that there are today still few amenities and institutions that serve the community. There are a couple of small stores that carry the foodstuffs needed to prepare

Vietnamese food, both owned by ethnic Chinese from Saigon. There are also a few Vietnamese restaurants, but these cater mostly to a non-Vietnamese clientele. VANS was originally established to assist families and individuals deal with settlement issues and to provide a focal point for the Vietnamese in Halifax (Boyd 1981, 30). Today it provides some measure of group cohesiveness through a number of activities. They gather to celebrate the Mid-Autumn Festival or Lantern Festival (Tết Trung Thu) and hold their major annual event during Lunar New Year's (Tết Nguyên Đán). The Association also represents the Vietnamese community at the annual Nova Scotia Multicultural Festival. For many years these were the only activities. In 2008 VANS was able to win a small grant from Human Resources and Social Development Canada to start weekly activities for elders and a Vietnamese language course for children (VANS 2008).⁶ In recent years they have held a weekend retreat at a camp in Nova Scotia in the summer. Secular associations such as VANS have also been established in ten other cities across Canada, and there is a central organisation, called The Vietnamese Canadian Federation, headquartered in Ottawa.⁷ These organisations are typically non-sectarian, and have the mandate to maintain communal solidarity and Vietnamese language, traditions and customs, regardless of the religious affiliations of the participants. Along with the central function of maintaining Vietnamese language and traditions, they also do some work on social issues. There are group efforts to assist Vietnamese who are still in refugee camps in concert with the national federation. The association in Halifax has been involved in recent years with helping a Vietnamese boy who needed substantial reconstructive surgery on his face. They also raise money for a national project to construct the Vietnamese Boat People Museum in Ottawa.⁸

Migration and New Communal Function of Temples

Much of what has been written regarding Vietnamese diasporic Buddhism (and there has not been much) has focused on the role that Vietnamese Buddhism in particular, and religion in general, has played in the resettlement process. The only book-length treatment of the subject is Paul Rutledge's *The Role of Religion in Ethnic Self-Identity: A Vietnamese Community*, which sees religion as "...a strategic tool in greater community acceptability and intra-community identification. At times employed interchangeably with ethnicity (i.e., to be Buddhist is to be Vietnamese)..." (Rutledge 1985, 74). Thuan Huynh's essay, "Centre for Vietnamese Buddhism: Recreating Home" (2002) develops similar themes, outlining the religious and social roles of a Vietnamese Buddhist institution in Houston, Texas. Thuan Huynh points out:

The centre has... become more than a religious institution, as religion and ethnicity have been blended there. Everyone there is Vietnamese, and Vietnamese is spoken everywhere one turns. The aroma of Vietnamese food emanates from the kitchen, diffusing throughout the halls. It is a place where traditional customs are practiced. It is one of the few places, other than their own homes, where their ethnicity is not compromised, where they can exercise their ethnic identity without the scrutiny of intolerant and uncomprehending eyes. (Thuan Huynh 2000, 172)

While noting adaptations, like offering language courses to youth, Hien Duc Do writes of a Vietnamese temple in the U.S.:

With respect to the older generation, by offering religious and social guidance (for example, by translating the prayer book from Chinese to Vietnamese and including some passages addressing struggles in daily life), the temple has also provided a place where members of that generation can continue to practice their traditions and affirm their values even as they adjust to American circumstances. (Do 2006, 91-92)

Similar to Rutledge, Judith Law notes, "...Vietnamese in Britain seem to have used religion as a means to maintain their ethnic identity whilst being acceptable to the host community" (Law 1991, 57). Tuong Quang Luu's brief essay describes the development of Vietnamese Buddhism in Australia, and speculates that the main challenge will be adapting it to be suitable for subsequent generations because of resistance to change (Luu 2011). Dorais sees Buddhism for the Vietnamese in Canada as playing a dual role: "it enables its adepts to connect with a spiritual universe and a world view with which they are familiar, while giving them the opportunity to express an ethnic identity they often perceive as jeopardized by emigration" (2006, 136). Indeed, when researching Vietnamese Buddhism, it is difficult to overlook this important aspect that has stood as emblematic for what has been deemed "ethnic Buddhism".⁹

This communal aspect of Buddhist practice is entirely new. In Vietnam, the temple is also the focal point of Buddhist practice, but in a different way. Particularly for the very committed (who tend to be older women), religious social lives revolve around the temple and its activities, which is typically chanting sutras four days every lunar month. However, the vast majority of those who consider themselves Buddhist tend to practice individually by going to the temple on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month to make offerings, and therefore do not engage with any temple

community (see Soucy 2012). In the diaspora, practice becomes equated with reciting sutras on Sundays, which is more involved than most Buddhists would be in Vietnam. Temples in Canada are generally not accessible for individuals to visit simply to make offerings. Thus, practicing Buddhism in Canada simultaneously introduces a communal aspect that was not present for most in Vietnam, but also requires a heightened level of practice and commitment.

During the course of research undertaken in Montréal, Ottawa, and Toronto, the communal identity and supportive nature of Vietnamese Buddhist institutions were prominent features. Thus, at Buddhist temples principally constituted by a particular ethnic community we not only have religious activities focused on devotional chanting to the buddhas and bodhisattvas, mortuary and memorial activities, and perhaps some meditation (as would be the case with temples in Vietnam). They also have activities like youth groups, social performances and language instruction.

While Vietnamese Buddhist temples provide a cultural focus on which communal identity can be fixed in the diasporic setting, the way that this happens is not always clear. Thuan Huynh implies that the Centre for Vietnamese Buddhism in Houston was set up with the intention of providing a strictly Buddhist space, and that it grew into a cultural space as a consequence of internal pressures. Monastics I have spoken with have had varying approaches with regard to including cultural and communal aspects in the temple. Some feel that this should not be a primary function of the Buddhist temple in the diasporic setting, while others see it as an important shift to accommodate the new situation. Nonetheless, this dual purpose seems almost inevitable for Vietnamese Buddhist temples in an overseas context, whether or not it was initially an explicit goal.

In Canada, as in the United States and elsewhere, the establishment of Buddhist institutions was a priority for newly forming Vietnamese communities. Thus, Vietnamese Buddhist temples were, in most places, among the first organisations and institutions (not to mention physical structures) that were constructed. Liên-Hoa Temple in Brossard, on the South Shore, across from Montréal, was established in 1975, as one of the first communal actions of the first major wave of Vietnamese refugees to Canada (Dorais 2006, 123).

Other temples in Montréal, Toronto, Ottawa and elsewhere, were not long to follow. Tam Bảo Temple in Montréal was founded in 1982. In 1983 Quan Âm Temple was established in Montréal, after a disagreement between some of the lay community and the monastic leadership at Tam Bảo Temple (Dorais 2006, 124). In 1987 another break, this time between the Quan Âm Temple and the monk that they had just sponsored, led to the creation of Thuyền Tôn Temple. Others followed, so that today there

are nine temples in Montréal. The Vietnamese Buddhists in Québec City established an itinerant temple that could be set up anywhere. It was inaugurated on the eve of Tết 1986 (Dorais 1987, 152). Since then a house on the outskirts of the city was bought as a more permanent place of worship.

In Toronto, Vietnamese Buddhists founded a number of temples early on, and have continued to give stalwart support to these institutions, so that, in Janet McLellan's words: "Vietnamese Buddhist temples are among the most viable and well-structured institutions to serve the Vietnamese community" (1999, 107). The first temple was inaugurated in 1976, and three others were added by 1992. Today there are eight temples in Toronto and a number of others in outlying cities like Mississauga, Hamilton, London and Kitchener. Elsewhere in Canada, Hải Hội Temple started in Winnipeg in 1987, Chánh Tâm Temple in Saskatoon in 1988, Hải Đức Temple in Regina in 1990, and Vạn Hạnh Temple and Hải Ân Temple in Vancouver in 1992 and 1994, respectively. So, most Vietnamese temples in Canada were founded within ten years of the bulk of Vietnamese refugees arriving here. Today there are approximately fifty Vietnamese temples across Canada, located in every province west of Quebec. There are, however, none in the Atlantic provinces.

The distribution of Vietnamese temples in Canada follows the demographic distribution of Vietnamese. Vietnamese refugees often found themselves settled in remote corners of Canada because the sponsorship process, which in turn arose out of the difficult situation of responding to the humanitarian crisis of the Boat People. This dispersal led to many Vietnamese families undertaking a secondary internal migration within Canada, eventually resulting in the clustering of the majority of Vietnamese Canadians in relatively few urban centres in Canada. The largest populations, representing 69% of Vietnamese Canadians, are located in Toronto, Montréal, Vancouver and Calgary (Lindsay 2007, 10).¹⁰ Relatively few Vietnamese settled in Atlantic Canada, and most of these either settled immediately in Halifax or moved there shortly after.

Part of the process of the multiplication of Vietnamese Buddhist sites in Canada had to do with grave difficulties encountered when trying to re-create religious institutions in a place that was fundamentally different from their homeland. There were frequent disruptions and schisms brought about by disagreements over the amount of control the laity should have in the temple, with monastics, predictably, insisting that they ought to be in charge, as they had been in Vietnam. Nonetheless, this had the positive effect of accelerating the spread of Vietnamese Buddhism across the Canadian religious landscape.

Due to the small population of Vietnamese Buddhists in Halifax, a secular

association that included Christians, rather than a religious institution, was set up when the refugees first arrived in Halifax. There are no statistics that indicate the number of Vietnamese in Nova Scotia who are Buddhist, but my impression is that the numbers are likely similar to the Canada-wide demographics: “In 2001, 48% of people with Vietnamese origins said they were Buddhists, while 22% said they were Catholic and 5% said they belonged to either a mainline Protestant denomination or another Christian group. At the same time, a relatively large proportion of people of Vietnamese origin, 24%, said they had no religious affiliation, compared with 17% of the overall population” (Lindsay 2007, 11). Speaking more generally, in the absence of any widely agreed criteria for what constitutes a Buddhist identity or any agreed process for “becoming” a Buddhist, firm statistics concerning Buddhist religious affiliation have been notoriously difficult to establish. Peter Beyer, in his analysis of Canadian census data on Buddhism, notes that the numbers represent only self-declarations of religious identity, and not “whether or how they actively practice that religion” (2010, 112). It is likely that in Halifax, while roughly half of the Vietnamese population would declare themselves Buddhist, far fewer would actually practice Buddhism.¹¹ By contrast, larger communities have both secular and religious organisations, with Buddhist temples often fulfilling many of the same functions – and more effectively – than the associations.

The question of relative roles of secular Vietnamese associations and Buddhist temples in fostering community solidarity is an interesting one. In this function, they frequently overlap. This is particularly the case in Ottawa, for example, where association functions sometimes take place on temple grounds. In Montréal and Toronto, temples tend to play a larger community role. It is notable, however, that in larger cities that have established secular Vietnamese associations, these have not been seen as replacements for Buddhist temples. So, while the communal function is an important aspect of the temple, it cannot be reduced to only this, even though temples in many cases do replicate many of the community activities of the secular associations (e.g. Vietnamese language instruction for children.) The Vietnamese in Halifax are not qualitatively different than communities elsewhere, other than being too small to support a temple. Thus, while there is overlap, the presence of the secular association does not lessen the desire for a temple as well.

Buddhist Spaces in Halifax

Although there is an association that continues to act as the focal-point of the community, there is no religious, and especially Buddhist, institution

for Vietnamese in Halifax. Nor is there any that would be close enough to serve their religious needs. In fact, the closest Vietnamese Buddhist institution is in Québec City – a twelve hour drive from Halifax. While there is no religious centre, there are active Vietnamese Buddhists in Halifax who lack a viable location to practice their religion communally. There are two Buddhist spaces and another Buddhist group that have had the potential to be used by Vietnamese Buddhists in the Halifax area, but they have not become focal points for various reasons. I will describe these spaces before turning to how the continuing need for religious practice is addressed in circumstances that have not allowed for the establishment of a Vietnamese Buddhist temple.

The Buddhist space most often spoken about by the Vietnamese community is the Eastern Sea Temple, located in an old farm house about fifty kilometers from Halifax, near Peggy's Cove. The property was bought by Eastern Land Buddhist Association in the autumn of 1994, and this association was established by an ethnic Chinese monk named Jianming Shifu and some overseas Chinese in Halifax, who had invited him from Toronto. The monk has lived there permanently since 1994, though he sometimes travels back to Toronto.¹² For a number of years, the Vietnamese Buddhists went there for services on weekends. One woman, who is around 50 years old and has been in Halifax since the early 1990s, related how it was an important place for Vietnamese Buddhists to gather:

The temple at Peggy's Cove was not set up by the Vietnamese community. A Chinese woman invited the monk to come to Halifax and she bought that house for him, and... tried to create a temple in Halifax... Something happened and then she did not go there anymore with him and he had to manage everything by himself. Then I heard she opened another temple. You know the one on Windsor Street... The temple at Peggy's Cove and the temple on Windsor, both Chinese and Vietnamese can come. The monk at Peggy's Cove can speak three languages – English Chinese and Vietnamese. That's why we came to that temple.¹³

While the Eastern Sea Temple was the main site of Buddhist practice for the Vietnamese community, things changed several years ago, though there is a lack of clarity over the cause (Corkum 2010, 51-52). The woman quoted above is not entirely sure of the reason for the change, other than that she heard that the master does not want anyone to go there anymore. This reflected general confusion I encountered in my informants as to why the Vietnamese Buddhists no longer go there. Another informant said:

I have to practice now at home. We only have a few temples, one in Peggy's Cove... There is a monk and he built his temple up there. We used to go there a lot three years ago but we don't go there a lot anymore because he's absent from the temple. He stays there maybe for a few months and then maybe goes somewhere else. We used to go there almost every Sunday.¹⁴

Another young man, echoing the explanation that I heard most often, said:

In fact, a few years ago we used to have a large temple in St. Margaret's Bay [i.e. Peggy's Cove], and... um... it's a little shaky now because... uh... you know... before it used to be like a retreat where the family would get together on the weekend with other Vietnamese families, for kind of like a spiritual retreat. But now its only open for people who want to meditate and... I don't know, like, even [for someone such as] myself [who considers himself Buddhist]... I don't think I'd spend my entire weekends meditating, you know what I mean? I like to go there for retreats and to learn a little bit more, so... Ever since then, my only religious [practice] is kind of [on] my own.¹⁵

This explanation, that the monk shifted the focus of practice at the temple from sutra chanting to meditation, would have been problematic, as chanting sutras is seen as the core activity for Vietnamese Buddhists, whereas meditation has been uncommon.¹⁶ This, however, is not a likely explanation, as Jianming Shifu does not focus on sitting meditation as a central practice, and does still recite sutras. Instead, in a discussion with him, he said that ethnicity was of no concern, and that the temple welcomes everyone to come to learn the Buddhist Dharma, but that he hopes that all visitors should follow the regulations of the temple and the master's guidance.¹⁷ Some I spoke with in the community expressed to me how the Vietnamese Buddhists who had gone to Eastern Sea Temple were stuck at a basic level of practice, where they would go to the temple to make wishes for materialistic gain and to socialise rather than to learn about Buddhism. The monk at Peggy's Cove, they said, felt he was wasting his time, so he put an end to the devotional practices at his temple.¹⁸ It is also possible that there were struggles for control of the temple, a frequent cause of splits in diaspora temples. Regardless of the cause, most people expressed to me that it had a negative effect on the Vietnamese Buddhist community in Halifax, and wished that people could resume practicing there.

A second possible location for a Vietnamese Buddhist temple is on Windsor Street in Halifax. In 1994 the Chinese community in Halifax bought an old Wesleyan church and established the Ji Jing Chan Temple

(Matthews 2006, 15).¹⁹ A monk named Yun Feng Shifu resides part of the time at this temple and the rest of his time at a hermitage outside of Ottawa. He is also in the process of starting a temple in China. Thus, he is often not in Halifax.²⁰ Like Jianming Shifu at the Peggy's Cove temple, he is ethnic Chinese born and raised in Saigon, Vietnam. However, the monastic robes he wears are in the Chinese rather than the Vietnamese style, and his mother tongue is Chinese, not Vietnamese. While this monk prefers meditation, the ten or so families that congregate there weekly prefer to recite sutras, and so this is the main form of practice on Sundays. However, they chant sutras exclusively in Chinese at this temple, and therefore only Sino-Vietnamese go there (Corkum 2010, 52). In the words of one woman:

There is another temple on Windsor but that is a Chinese community temple so for those people that can speak Chinese they still go there. I visited that place a few time. A few people that can speak Chinese still go there.²¹

Another woman said that she used to go to the temple on Windsor Street, but as she did not know Chinese, she would just sit and listen (Corkum 2010, 52), but she also no longer goes there. The ethno-linguistic nature of the temple means that it is not really viable for the Vietnamese community, and ultimately does not offer a solution to Vietnamese Buddhists in Halifax.²²

Finally, there is a small group belonging to the *Tiếp Hiện* – Order of Interbeing, founded by the Vietnamese monk-in-exile, Thích Nhất Hạnh. The group, called the Waves and Water Sangha, was formed by Bethan Lloyd, an ordained lay member of the tradition (Matthews 2006, 155), and the Buddhist Chaplain at Dalhousie University for a period (See Woo 2005). She moved away around 2007 and the group has managed to continue without her presence. Thích Nhất Hạnh is notable in that he has been able to form a bifurcated organisation that has followers of both Vietnamese and European ethnicity. While the organisation in many ways can be considered successful for bridging the gap between Asian and Western practitioners there remains a distinction between these groups within the overall organisation. In many cities across Canada there are separate groups from this organisation for Vietnamese and for Westerners, with the Vietnamese groups tending to rely more heavily on ethnic Vietnamese motifs. The group in Halifax, however, is comprised exclusively of Westerners, and does not draw any Vietnamese participants.

This is not entirely surprising, given that there is little that is culturally Vietnamese about the group. The group's central focus is meditation,

which most Vietnamese Buddhists do not practice, and there are none of the devotional practices that are central to Buddhism in Vietnam. Furthermore, the language of the group is English, while a number of the Vietnamese Buddhists in Halifax have relatively limited English language skills. There are members of the Vietnamese community who do listen to recordings of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teaching in Vietnamese either on line or on CD. However, no Vietnamese Buddhists in Halifax have expressed any interest whatsoever in joining the group – in fact, they have never even mentioned it when asked of possibilities for practice.

The reason for this disconnection likely lies in the functional gap between the group's practice and community needs. As mentioned, the group primarily focusses on meditation, while eschewing almost all practices that would be culturally familiar. Furthermore, the space itself is not reminiscent of Vietnamese Buddhist spaces. Originally the group practiced in Bethan Lloyd's house, but no attempt was made to make the space look anything like a Vietnamese Buddhist temple, and there was little reason for her to do so, as her practice was entirely removed from a Vietnamese religious context and was not intended to replicate Vietnamese forms. After her departure, the group has moved its meetings to a multi-faith space at Dalhousie University. Again, there is nothing in the space that would evoke Vietnamese Buddhist moods or modalities. The group does not perform any rituals that would be considered important to the Vietnamese Buddhist community, such as funerals or commemorations. Nor does it celebrate important Vietnamese festivals like Vu Lan (Ullambana). Finally, there is no Vietnamese monastic to act as an authoritative figure that would attract Vietnamese Buddhists. In short, the Waves and Water Sangha, like other Western Buddhist groups in Halifax, does not fulfill any of the ethno-cultural functions that is an inherent and expected part of Vietnamese temples in the West.²³

Practice without a temple

The main reason there is no Vietnamese Buddhist temple in Halifax is the lack of a population large enough to provide the requisite financial support. However, this does not entirely explain why there has been no serious attempt by the Vietnamese community to establish a Buddhist temple in Halifax. While money is certainly an issue, and many of the Vietnamese in Halifax work in relatively low paying jobs, additional challenges are described by one young man as follows:

I think there are many reasons. I think one of the biggest is money – because the Buddhist population here in Nova Scotia is very small

compared to others. And also the demographics of people who work here in Nova Scotia, they are, like, taxi drivers or shift workers. It's kind of hard for them to congregate in one place at any given time. With that being said, you know, maybe taxi drivers for instance... [many in the] Vietnamese community are taxi drivers, so working on Sunday deters from going to a temple, and with no money coming in to a temple, it is really hard to set one up without financial support, right? I think, maybe other interests... priorities [may be a factor]. I believe when I was in university, I had to focus a lot more time into studying, and now [working] all the time, I am not sure I could even devote a whole day, you know? So I think... that's probably a large reason why.²⁴

Thus, while he feels that the demographic reality of the Vietnamese community in Halifax limits the potential for building a temple, he also points to the kinds of jobs in which members of the community are engaged, which presents other barriers, like time conflicts. Corkum has also pointed out that political concerns, especially when importing a monk from Vietnam, are an additional obstacle, as there are still lingering negative feelings about the Vietnamese government, and a distance between Overseas Vietnamese who have been living in the West for over thirty years and those who never left Vietnam (Corkum 2010, 48-50).

Despite the obstacles that have thus far impeded the establishment of a Vietnamese Buddhist temple, there is a general feeling that it would be a good thing to have a temple of their own. One woman expressed it this way: "Definitely. The Peggy's Cove temple is only open a few months of the year and it is far away. Some people, especially beginners, need a temple and a place they can go for guidance to learn Buddhism and to get advice." She continued: "I hope that in the future, more Vietnamese come here and stay. I am willing to make it happen (building a temple) and I think others are willing to as well."²⁵ This opinion was also held by another woman in her 50s, who said: "Yes we need to have one for Vietnamese people, need a master to advise, and everyone agrees but no one starts it. We really need someone to start it but don't know who can start."²⁶

However, the sentiment is not universal: "for me, you know I can't speak for anyone else, but for me the temple is not important. [putting her hand over her heart] Buddhism is about here."²⁷ Another didn't really see the point of continuing to practice here in Canada: "Grandma, grandpa... they live in Vietnam. Who are we praying here for? No one. What for? Some families...in Vietnam... they can pray for them in Vietnam. They died in Vietnam so they pray in Vietnam... That's why we don't pray here."²⁸

One of the main reasons for wanting to have a temple in Halifax is to teach Buddhism to their children. Asked whether her children were Buddhist one woman replied:

Yes I am teaching them. My oldest daughter (6), last July I sent her to a Buddhist camp from a temple in Montréal for a month. They teach her everyday how to behave, how to pray and learn Vietnamese language. Even my youngest daughter (4); she sits and pray and say the name of the Buddha with me. They see me practice... For me, my practice benefits me, and helps me when I'm feeling down and stressed and my practice will make me feel relief. I can get through during difficult times without problem. And I want to pass that on to my children so they can have an easy life and feel relief from practice of Buddhism.²⁹

The same woman feels that it is important to have a temple for those who are younger:

It's hard for beginners because of the lack of a "truly" Vietnamese temple. People may forget. Even if you are Buddhist, without a place it is hard to keep Buddhism active. I'm ok, I am getting stronger and older but I began by going to the temple.³⁰

While the causes for there being no Buddhist temple for the Vietnamese community in Halifax, and the desire by some to eventually establish one, are predictable, perhaps a more important question is what they do in the absence of one. A number of scholars have pointed to the centrality of the religious space for maintaining cultural ties that allow for eventual integration into the larger host society. For this reason, the establishment of temples has been a priority for Vietnamese communities in most cities. In Vietnam, however, the Buddhist temple does not, as mentioned, serve the function of fostering community solidarity. Many people who consider themselves Buddhist only go to the Buddhist temple as individuals – saying prayers, making offerings and then leaving.

It is tempting, therefore, to see Buddhism as being relatively diffused in Vietnamese society. This might lead one to conflate Vietnamese and Buddhist identities – that is, to be Vietnamese is to be Buddhist. However, this perception of the socially diffuse nature of religion in the Vietnamese context is probably overstated. As Peter Beyer describes, religion in global society has brought about precisely the establishment of "religion" as something distinct rather than diffused (Beyer 2006), and the Vietnamese have been participating in this discourse since the beginning of the twentieth century. It is a mistake to view the Vietnamese

as pre-modern or “traditional”, and not drawing boundaries between social life and “religious” behaviour. While some conflation of Buddhism and Vietnamese identity occurs, it is almost always presented in rhetorical statements intended to stress the importance of Buddhism rather than lived as a social fact. Vietnamese in Halifax do not feel less Vietnamese for the lack of a temple. Nor do Christian Vietnamese feel any less Vietnamese. For Buddhists, however, it is seen as desirable to have a Buddhist institution, and in other locations the Buddhist temple has certainly performed the function of catalysing community.

Thus, it is not surprising that people continue to practice in their homes and do not feel that it compromises their Buddhist identity in any way. In fact, and somewhat ironically, the lack of temple in Halifax has meant that Buddhist practice has not taken on the diasporic adaptation of fostering community solidarity. The communal role that is a central function of many temples in Canada and elsewhere, and which appears to have previously been an important part of the activities at the Peggy’s Cove temple, continues to be desired. It is perhaps partly for this reason that people turned away from Peggy’s Cove when it was no longer providing the communal function. In its place is left only the secular Vietnamese Association of Nova Scotia, which may be enough. In fact, it appears that in the absence of the Peggy’s Cove space, the Association has increased its activities. Whereas previously it only organised meetings on key holidays, represented the Vietnamese community at the annual Multicultural Festival and perhaps had a picnic in the summer, in recent years the Association has met weekly, offering Vietnamese classes to children and Tai Chi for elders, as well as holding more planning meetings and a weekend summer retreat. Still, this does not answer the religious need of people who still consider themselves Buddhist, so some strategies have emerged to fulfill this religious need.

Many Vietnamese Buddhists in Halifax practice individually. As mentioned, this is not entirely incongruent with Buddhist practice in Vietnam, though in Vietnam individual practice usually includes visits to the temple. Individual practice is made even easier by the communication revolution that has been brought on by digital media. Many Buddhists feel that they can continue their practice and further their understandings of Buddhism by listening to CDs or by watching dharma talks on the internet. As one woman said: “At home I listen to the Bible (i.e. Buddhist sutras) the teachings, DVDs – of a lot of monks in the States or Vietnam or anywhere in the world.”³¹ Prominent monks who disseminate in this way include Thích Nhất Hạnh, based in France, and Thích Thánh Từ, based in Vietnam, but there are many. These discs are passed along between friends and are sent from relatives who live in cities that have greater access to

Buddhist resources. Now, dharma talks by even relatively junior monks can be streamed online.

One young man I spoke with practiced Buddhism in Halifax with his family, and eventually went to Memphis, Tennessee, to enter a monastery and become a monk. He had heard of the master at the temple there, not through personal connections, but through the internet. He returned several years ago to be closer to his aging mother, and was living with his sister when I interviewed him. Though he remains with his head shaved and still calls himself a monk, he has no interest in starting a temple and has taken no initiative to do so.³²

Another woman similarly said that she practices at home by herself. She brought a Buddhist prayer book with her when she left Vietnam, and she still reads from it regularly. She says that while Halifax is now like a second home (after 30 years), she nonetheless still finds comfort from chanting from the book (Corkum 2010, 55).³³ She also follows a vegetarian diet, which is a common form of individual practice, in which the faithful choose to maintain a vegetarian diet several days per month. Those who decide to undertake this may start with a couple of days and then increase the number according to the level of commitment. This form of vegetarianism has a very important symbolic and moral meaning that is often integral to self-conceptions and Buddhist identities. These forms of home practice are not only the last resort of Buddhists in places like Halifax, but are quite central to the practices even of Buddhists in Vietnam. However, in the absence of temples, they take on special significance.

There is a desire by some to augment home practice by meeting to chant sutras in a larger group. This was certainly the impetus, after all, to fund the establishment of temples and sponsor monastics from refugee camps to conduct rituals in larger Vietnamese communities. Law reports that in Britain there were similar problems, with many Vietnamese Buddhists (in 1991) living too far from the one Vietnamese temple in London to attend regularly. In the face of this obstacle, many Vietnamese Buddhists practiced at home and would meet in small groups in people's homes. Nonetheless, they felt that temples were emotionally important, so they would hire minibuses to take them to the temple for important occasions (Law 1991, 44).

Since the temple at Peggy's Cove was closed to regular sutra chanting rituals there are occasional opportunities for larger gatherings of Vietnamese Buddhists. Usually these occasions revolve around the invitation of a monastic to come to Halifax. However, these opportunities are irregular. The last visit of which I am aware was in August 2009, when a nun was invited up from California to conduct a memorial service for the mother of a woman in the community. While she was here she also

conducted a public ritual to honour mothers on the festival of Vu Lan (Ullambana). A woman in her forties described the ritual in this way:

Last August, a US nun – we invited her here for a ceremony at St. Andrews Centre for Mother’s Day, or something, and we read together, prayed together, and we would put flowers on to remember our mothers. Red if our mother was still alive and white if she had passed.³⁴

It was the biggest gathering that had taken place for many years, and was well attended, with over sixty people present. Many informants remembered it as the only time that such a gathering had occurred. Nonetheless, it took place only because the nun happened to be here, and there are no plans to hold an event such as this more regularly. The monk at Peggy’s Cove occasionally performs funerary rituals at the request of Vietnamese families, and this is another opportunity for Vietnamese Buddhists to participate in a public ritual.

However, the main public ritual is held by a sub-group within the Vietnamese community who mainly work as beauticians, and who are reported to gather on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month. This group is quite closed, however, and they appear to stand apart even from the larger Vietnamese community, so that my informants spoke of “the nail people” (as they are sometimes called) as a distinct group whose activities were not entirely known. One woman in her 50s describes a vibrant Buddhist scene that takes place:

Yes, at people’s houses. About 20 families and children (around 50 or 60 people) will get together on important days in people’s house and chant together. Many have an altar in their home – some have whole rooms – and on special days we will come to someone’s house and chant together and have a vegetarian potluck, make offerings to the Buddha, and eat.³⁵

However, as stated already, this group is quite closed and, as I have not yet been able to gain access to them, my information is second hand. It is noteworthy that in Halifax it appears that it is the least integrated members of the community who appear to have the most vigorous practice.

Conclusion

The lack of critical mass in the Vietnamese community means that they have not been able to sustain a Buddhist space. Both the Eastern Sea Temple near Peggy’s Cove, and Ji Jing Chan Temple on Windsor Street have not

successfully coalesced a Vietnamese Buddhist community. Likewise, the Buddhist groups that are principally made up of westerner converts – including the Order of Interbeing – have not been appealing because they lack cultural resonance. For many, the lack of temple and community has made it difficult to continue practicing Buddhism as they would have in Vietnam, which would involve at least a couple of visits to the temple for making offerings and prayers. Others feel there is no point in practicing at all in Canada. Nonetheless, there are various strategies that have been employed to compensate. Occasionally inviting a monk or nun to Halifax and asking the monk at Peggy’s Cove to conduct funeral rituals provides some opportunity for people to practice Buddhism. A few Vietnamese people in Halifax gather together at people’s houses on a rotating basis to chant sutras. However, the most frequent way that Buddhism is practiced by Vietnamese in Halifax is through individual practices, like listening to recordings, either on CDs and DVDs or on-line. This is combined with other activities, like eating vegetarian food, chanting sutras and making offerings at a home altar. Despite this, the lack of a temple in Halifax continues to be problematic, though Buddhists persevere as best they can, as expressed to me by one middle-aged woman:

Usually we Buddhists... we have to do something: praying, read[ing] the Bible [i.e. sutras], and something like that. But usually the old people used to do it. Not us. And if we live nearby them, we will follow them and go to the temple with them. Something like that. But here we have nowhere to go. No one to go with. No one to read the Bible with. So at home we just copy – I told you before – put a statue on the top and just put fruit, water and incense, something like that, to feel safe. Yeah. That is what we have to do...³⁶

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NOTES

- ¹ Lori-Anne Corkum deserves much credit for this paper. She contributed to the research, and used some of the material in her B.A. Honours thesis, entitled, “Vietnamese Buddhism in Halifax: A Community Without Walls” (Corkum 2010).
- ² It is estimated that between April 1975 and April 1980, 900 000 people left Vietnam as refugees in response to the Communist assumption of control over the south, and the stress put on the southern population that resulted from it (particularly for those formerly associated with the power structure of the South Vietnamese regime and armed forces that fought against the Communists) (Dorais, Pilon-Lê, and Nguyễn 1987, 76).
- ³ There were a few Vietnamese from the south who came to study under scholarship starting in the 1950s (Dorais, Pilon-Lê and Nguyễn 1987, 16; Dorais and Richard 2007, 22).
- ⁴ Most of these were ethnic Vietnamese and Sino-Vietnamese, but there were smaller numbers of Cambodians and Laotians who are also included as part of the “Boat People”.
- ⁵ The 2006 census lists 340 native Vietnamese speakers in Halifax (Statistics Canada 2007a), and 655 ethnic Southeast Asians (Statistics Canada 2007b).
- ⁶ The language course for children lasted a year or two after the funding ended, though they still have the intention of continuing it when the opportunity arises.
- ⁷ The Vietnamese associations in Canada are: The Vietnamese Canadian Community in Greater Vancouver; Calgary Vietnamese Canadian Association; Edmonton Viets Association; Saskatoon Vietnamese Association; Free Vietnamese Association of Manitoba; Vietnamese Association of Toronto; Vietnamese Canadian Community of Ottawa; Free Vietnamese Community of Windsor; Association des vietnamiens de Sherbrooke; Communauté vietnamienne au Canada, Région de Montréal; and Vietnamese Association of Nova Scotia.
- ⁸ The Vietnamese Canadian Federation bought the land on April 30, 2009, across the street from the Vietnamese Commemorative Monument on the corner of Preston and Somerset Streets in Ottawa. They plan to start construction of the museum as soon as they have raised sufficient money.
- ⁹ There are many objections to the term “ethnic Buddhists”. The term is indeed problematic, as it presupposes that Westerners are non-ethnic or ethnically neutral, and therefore sets up an us/them duality (Hori 2010). I refer here to communities that are mostly ethnically homogeneous, composed of Buddhists who have come from Asia and their descendants, so long as they continue to practice in a communal setting comprised of others from the same “homeland” and identify their practice with their homeland. In Canada, Sri Lankan and Southeast Asia communities fit this designation most easily. Chinese and Japanese groups that have been in Canada for more than a century still fit this description, as they quite often follow a similar function of preserving linguistic and cultural group solidarity and continuity. However individuals within these communities may not fit quite so easily into the descriptive label. There are newer internationalised organisations that may still be relatively homogeneous, but do not have the characteristics of an ethnic community

to the same extent. An example of such a group would be the Buddha Light International (Fo Guang Shan) organisation, as they have the qualities of a globalised Buddhist organisation and are actively seeking to downplay their ethnic character, though not without some difficulty (Chandler 2004).

¹⁰ This is according to the 2001 census. At that time, there were 45 000 in Toronto, 26 000 in Montreal, 23 000 in Vancouver and 12 000 in Calgary (Lindsay 2007, 10).

¹¹ Here I mean “practice” in the very broadest sense, including more intense practices like reciting sutras at home or in groups or meditating, but also activities like praying to buddhas and/or bodhisattvas, reading Buddhist books, listening to Buddhist recordings (of sutras or of teachings), discussing Buddhism, celebrating Buddhist holidays or using Buddhist morality to guide behaviour (such as eating vegetarian food on certain days of the lunar month).

¹² Matthews wrote that he was involved with a Chinese temple in Toronto named Cham Shan (Matthews 2006, 152), but Jianming Shifu stated in an interview in December 2012 that this was no longer the case, and that he stayed fulltime at the Eastern Sea Temple.

¹³ Interviewed in March 2010.

¹⁴ Woman in her sixties, interviewed in January 2010.

¹⁵ Interviewed in January 2010. See Corkum (2010).

¹⁶ For more on Buddhist practice overseas see Nguyen and Barber (1998), and for Vietnam see Soucy (2012).

¹⁷ Interviewed December 2012.

¹⁸ Interview with a woman in her thirties, her brother and mother, March 2010.

¹⁹ Terry Woo describes this temple as having a Chinese-Vietnamese congregation (2005, 112).

²⁰ From interview with Yun Feng Shifu, February 2007.

²¹ Interview with middle-aged woman, March 2010.

²² Corkum also notes that there is some tension between the Chinese and Vietnamese communities (2010, 53-53).

²³ Other groups in Halifax include Atlantic Soto Zen Center, the Nalandabodhi Halifax Study Group and an informal Sri Lankan group. More notably, Halifax is the global headquarters of the large Shamabhala Buddhist organisation.

²⁴ Interviewed January 2010.

²⁵ Middle-aged woman, March 2010.

²⁶ Interviewed March 2010.

²⁷ Interviewed March 2010.

²⁸ Middle-aged woman, March 2009.

²⁹ Woman in her 30s, interviewed January 2010.

³⁰ Woman in her 40s, interviewed January 2010.

³¹ Woman in her 40s, interviewed February 2010.

³² Interviewed November 2010.

³³ Older woman interviewed November 2010.

³⁴ Interviewed March 2010.

³⁵ Interviewed March 2010.

³⁶ Interviewed March 2010.