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Setkání ve Wat Dhammakittiwongu

Encounters at the Wat Dhammakittiwong

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Poděkování

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Prohlášení:

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracoval samostatně a výhradně s použitím citovaných primárních pramenů a sekundární literatury.

V Praze, dne 18. května 2017

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Klíčová slova (česky)

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Abstrakt (česky)

Tato práce vychází z terénního výzkumu provedeného v thajském buddhistickém chrámu (Watu) v Praze v roce 2016. Cílem práce je popsat a analyzovat chrámem organizované rituály jak za pomoci materialisticko-fenomenologických metod, tak z hlediska ideálně-typické théravádové kosmologie. Z postkoloniálních filozofických pozic se navíc věnuji procesu stávání se jiným. Metodologickým ohniskem této části analýzy jsou praxe a mimesis (především na základě teorií antropologa Michaela Taussiga). Každá kapitola je psaná na základě jiného, očekávaného nebo nečekaného, setkání ve Watu a nabízí možná řešení otázek, které vyvstaly v rámci těchto setkání.

Abstract (in English)

This paper is based on field-work performed in a Thai Buddhist Temple (Wat) in Prague in the year 2016. The aim is to describe and in describing analyze rituals organized in and through the temple from a materialist phenomenological point of view, as well as based on an ideal-type Theravāda cosmology. In drawing on post-colonial philosophy, part of the focus lies also on the process of becoming other. This is achieved in situating practice and mimesis (based on the anthropologist Michael Taussig's theory) at the center of methodological inquiry. Each chapter is based on different expected and unexpected encounters at the Wat, and offers a possible solution to the issues that these encounters raised.

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I. Prologue, or How I Learned to Find a Wat

“Life, in short, is a movement of opening, not of closure. As such, it should lie at the very heart of anthropological concern.”

- Tim Ingold, *Being Alive*

What would you think, if you saw Buddhist monks in Prague? Would you be surprised? Would you become inquisitive about the reason for their presence? Maybe you wouldn't even actively notice their presence. Or, perhaps you would just shrug your shoulders and tell ask yourself rhetorically: “Why shouldn't monks come to visit this beautiful city?” This is what I did, the first time I noticed Thai Buddhist monks in Prague. I seem to remember it as clear as day. Or so I tell myself. It was a late September morning a couple of years ago, I had just left my apartment and was on my way to university. The street was flooded with sunlight in golden orange hues. On this street, this event happens twice a year: once, when the sun sets over the iconic castle to the West and again when it rises to the East, each event about a half a year apart. I can honestly say, that I have never encountered this on other streets of Prague, the 'Golden City'. It is a city of winding alleyways that are often hidden in shadows. The one I lived at at that time, is named after a Czech Nobel Prize poet and is a wide street leading from the former working class district to the tourist-filled Old City, passing under a railroad bridge. Here, on this street, in the golden orange light I saw the characteristic saffron¹ robes². I recognized them from images and wondered: *what might Buddhist monks be doing here in this part of the world?* It was not the last time I would see monks on this street, yet for some reason I never gave these encounters much thought. This happened after all long before I developed any interest in and much less any knowledge of Thai Buddhism. Yet, there we were. Monks dressed in orange walking in the golden city drenched in golden orange light, and me, seeing them, but not really noticing.

It was only a few years later when I learned that there used to be a *Wat*³ on the street I used to live. All of a sudden it all made sense. It was during classes in Thai that I learned there was a Thai Wat in Prague. So I looked it up on the internet. The temple's website⁴ did not seem to be up-to-date, yet there was an address: “Seifertova 61, Praha 3 – Žižkov, 130 00, Czech Republic”. Just a couple of doors from where I used to live. No wonder I kept seeing *phra*

¹ Saffron colors are reportedly the result of local (in Southeast Asia) coloring techniques that use *Gamboge*. “*Gamboge*, a resin from trees in Thailand, which is a clear, bright, transparent yellow.” (M. Taussig, *What Color is the Sacred*, Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009, p. 159)

Cf. A. B. Cunningham et al, “Plants as the Pivot: the Ethnobotany of Timorese Textiles”, in Roy W. Hamilton & Joanna Barrkman (eds.), *Textiles of Timor*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014, pp. 89–105.

² Skr. *Kāṣāya*, pi. *Kasāva*.

³ The transcribed Thai word for (Buddhist) temple.

⁴ <http://www.thaitemple.cz/> (As of 2017, the website is down.)

*aacaan*⁵ every now and then. However, I don't remember noticing any Thai lay people. Perhaps they were there all the time and I just mistakenly, like the most people in Prague, categorized Thai as Vietnamese, the locally most common Southeast Asian ethnics, or perhaps as foreign tourists.

So I set out to visit this building thinking about doing my research there. It turned out to be almost impossible to find without the correct address and some conviction, as it was placed in a nondescript apartment building. Hidden in plain sight, so to speak. Without a doorbell it appeared even harder to get in. Luckily for me, there I noticed a Thai massage salon right next door. So I entered and greeted the lady in a low tone with the only Thai word I knew back then: “Sawat'dii (khrap)! Hello!” She smiled and asked if she could help me in distinctive English. I told her I was here to go to the Wat, to the temple. She didn't seem to understand. In English I told her about praying and monks, and while doing so I mimed gestures I imagined were done in a Thai Buddhist temple – and felt like an idiot copying orientalist clichés. But my actions helped. I finally managed to communicate what I meant. Immediately she took a small paper and jotted down the correct address on it. She knew very well where the temple was, even if the internet didn't. Thus I finally learned how to find the place to do my research in.

Inconspicuous is perhaps the most fitting adjective to describe the presence of Thai people and Thai cultural signs in Prague. Yet, once awareness of signs one ought to look for arises, it becomes much easier to see what is not there otherwise. Bruno Latour calls this “establishing access”.⁶ In fact, once specialized access is established, the reality of the whole city changes. As the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre beautifully put it: “Man does not live by words alone; all 'subjects' are situated in a space in which they must either recognize themselves or lose themselves, a space which they may both enjoy and modify. In order to accede to this space, individuals (children, adolescents) who are, paradoxically, already within it, must pass tests. This has the effect of setting up reserved spaces, such as places of initiation, within social space.”⁷ A space I was already in, I nevertheless first had to pass a test to accede it. This initiation did not come in the form of a complex ritual, but without actions by the initiated Thai masseuse, I would not have been able to establish access to the Wat. Had I tried to establish such access to a Wat in Thailand, where nowadays they not only are a dime a dozen, but also show themselves as Wats, the process of establishing access would not have required such help by the initiated.

Or, from a different but similar angle, presented by the anthropologist Tim Ingold: “[My] contention is that lives are led not inside places but through, around, to and from them, from and to places elsewhere.”⁸ Human existence in his ways of thinking (for which he draws extensively

⁵ *Phra* being a honorific, *aacaan* being the word for teacher (derived from skr. *ācārya*).

⁶ B. Latour, *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence: an Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. by C. Porter, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013, pp. 84–85.

⁷ H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by D. Nicholson-Smith, Cambridge – Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, p. 35.

⁸ T. Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on movement, knowledge and description*, London – New York: Routledge, 2011, pp. 145–155, p. 148.

on Western philosophical phenomenology) is not place-bound, but place-binding. “It unfolds not in places but along paths. Proceeding along a path, every inhabitant lays a trail. Where inhabitants meet, trails are entwined, as the life of each becomes bound up with the other.”⁹ Places for him become like knots.¹⁰ “Thus space may be said to embrace a multitude of intersections, each with its assigned location.”¹¹ Once a path opens up (me being told there is a Wat), it leads to a place (Wat), from where many further paths become apparent and possible to trail. Without the path, I would not have been able to access the place I was about to do field-work in. It is an inconspicuous villa in an outlying part of the city, and half-hidden behind a wall-like structure one can spy a wooden board with Thai letters, and when a wind blows through these parts, hanging flags (one Thai and one Buddhist) become explicitly visible. That is, visible, if one walks around these parts looking for flags. One most really practice noticing: “The closer one looks at any idiosyncratic feature of the city, the more one sees the tracks that lead to other cities in conjoined pasts and presents; the more carefully one follows these links, the more one is startled by the unique features they have given to the city. [...] In this sense, the confluence is the mode of situating and specifying cosmopolitanism, understood spatially as an appreciation of ideas, things, and beings from many places.”¹² And this noticing includes one my own cosmopolitan research practice.

As my search for the Wat showed me, places themselves are not as stable, as eternal and external to what humans do, as one has perhaps become accustomed to.¹³ At first, I did not find it where a path had led me, and had I not by chance encountered a Thai massage salon next door, I might have had to come up with different strategies for access. Thus the question presses itself close: how does it come about that a non-descript place (urban or non-urban) becomes stabilized into a form that is strong enough to bind paths, so that they lead to it? In abstract space any place is theoretically accessible from any other, but as I noticed during my journey aiming to establish a place for field-work, this does not correspond to my reality. The temple, the one that is currently presencing itself in the villa, is connectable to all other places, but only after access has been established. And access can be established only in case of sufficient stability. If a temple was located on a moving vehicle that does not have regularly formalized routes, it would become near impossible to establish access. Of course, most places of worship act as nodes for encounters and are thus stabilized spatially. Meanwhile in the work of Bruno Latour it is possible to find concepts that help formulate the process of stabilization and its conditions for possibility, while decentering it from the human without suppressing the (de)formation of all kinds of actors in the process. That is, “yielding to the life of the object.”¹⁴

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 149.

¹¹ Lefebvre, p. 33.

¹² A. Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004, p. 126.

¹³ Cf. M. Strathern, “On Space and Depth”, in A. Mol & J. Law (eds.), *Complexities: Social Studies of Knowledge Practices*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2002, pp. 88–115, p. 91.

¹⁴ M. Taussig, *The Corn Wolf*, Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015, p. 145.

Now that I have established access to the emerging knot, that is to the knotting of paths, which I already call a Wat, I feel the need to turn my attention to the paths of those, which Western cosmology ever since the Biblical Fall more often than not assigns the status of dead objects. In my paths to establishing access the objectivity of the objective turned out to be fickle. Yes, objectively, for now, an apartment building that had once co-formed the spatial existence of the Wat continued to persist. It had once helped stabilize the conditions of emergence for a place that could bind and did bind many trails. Non-organic entities have to persist in time, just as organic ones. As Lefebvre following Nietzsche writes: “In the realm of becoming, but standing against the flux of time, every defined form, whether physical, mental or social, struggles to establish and maintain itself.”¹⁵ It is the cooperation between non-organic and organic entities that enable the persistence of both. The paths of things and non-things are continually intertwined. Bruno Latour introduces the word *existent* so as to overcome the subject-object split by linguistic means.¹⁶ Existents, including places in their material dimensions, are always in a process of presencing via being generated by interaction of human and non-human activity and matter. Latour calls this to *persist in being* or *maintain oneself in existence*.¹⁷ They must maintain their existence and for me to be able to access them, they must “make themselves known.”¹⁸ Existents, quite apparently, do not make themselves known identically to everybody. They interact differently with different types of sentient beings, but also with each individual within a being-category. It is thus useful to think of them and us, who are among them, as potentialities that become actualized in different ways depending on what interacts.

Coming back to my own encounters, one can note that the Wat shows itself to some as merely another villa or apartment, yet to others, it makes itself present as an object in the Buddhist network that exceeds its being-a-villa. But its being-a-villa structures the possibilities of Wat-formation. The difference in perception lies in what Latour calls *establishing access*. Access is partial, comes from a particular perspective and existents show themselves differently depending on the paths one takes in encountering them. This presencing, that is making itself present, is thus constituted by interweaving pathways of existents – the more paths constitute a knot, the more present a place becomes and the less awareness is needed for its perception.¹⁹ Should a Wat become a huge knot in which locally dominant pathways meet, its presence would become marked materially, sensually with a certain kind of extraordinariness – as is common in Southeast Asia.²⁰ The imposing structures one finds all over the area are too a presencing of all

¹⁵ Lefebvre, *Production*, p. 22.

¹⁶ Latour, *Inquiry*, pp. 81–82.

¹⁷ “It does maintain itself, since it exists and endures and imposes itself on my steps as it does on the instruments [...], but in any case, and this is hard to doubt, what is maintained in it and through it does not have the same properties of inscription, documentation, or information as the properties that come and go along chains of reference.” (Latour, *Inquiry*, p. 82.)

¹⁸ Latour, *Inquiry*, p. 89.

¹⁹ “The historical and its consequences, the 'diachronic', the 'etymology' of locations in the sense of what happened at a particular spot or place and thereby changed it - all of this becomes inscribed in space. The past leaves its traces; time has its own script. Yet this space is always, now and formerly, a present space, given as an immediate whole, complete with its associations and connections in their actuality.” (Lefebvre, *Production*, p. 37.)

²⁰ “That the lived, conceived and perceived realms should be interconnected, so that the 'subject', the individual

kinds of existents. The difference lies in the types of existents that become stabilized. The knot of interwoven paths that becomes expressed in what today is considered as 'traditional' architecture then becomes so powerful, that it can presence itself even to an unaware passerby.²¹ As Henri Lefebvre writes “that an already produced space can be decoded, can be read. Such a space implies a process of signification.”²² Yet, without presencing qua maintaining-existence of material formations there is nothing to be read, to be articulated culturally, nothing to combine with signifiatory processes.

The Wat Dhammakittiwong of Prague however, is still far away from such strong presencing of its Buddhist identity, materially still more Prague villa than Theravāda Buddhist Temple. It leads a double existence. If “social space 'incorporates' social actions,”²³ then it does so as a polyphony. The social actions that entered into building the villa and those that entered into forming the Wat continue to exist side-by-side: “And even if there is no general code of space, inherent to language or to all languages, there may have existed specific codes, established at specific historical periods and varying in their effects.”²⁴ These codes, if we continue to think with Lefebvre, have a dialectical character; they are part of a practical relationship between subjects and their surroundings. This however is not Hegelian dialectics, it does not add up, there is not necessarily an *Aufhebung*. What I encountered is rather a continuing, if intertwined persisting in time of different codes, whose semiotic and material effectivity depends on the path through which they are approached. This is why, despite all the differences between Latourian (metaphysical) thought and empirico-constructivist (experiential) anthropologies,²⁵ I find the concept of existents useful. We, for humans too are existents, have lives of our own, we are singular, and cannot be totalized into one clearly defined and accessible form.

Without encountering (being-imposed on by) and following trails, it seems hardly possible to arrive at specific knots.²⁶ One is created by as much as creates such trails by becoming an interested subject, or as Anna Tsing calls it, without “noticing”.²⁷ Difference is thus not only produced by pre-intentional encounters, that is possible pathways, but also of the emergence of awareness of possibilities, that is noticing. Interest, at least in my case, emerged from my studies and guided me, forced me to notice, which in turn opened up paths towards a (subaltern) knot that

member of a given social group, may move from one to another without confusion - so much is a logical necessity. Whether they constitute a coherent whole is another matter. They probably do so only in favourable circumstances, when a common language, a consensus and a code can be established.” (Ibid., p. 40.)

²¹ This presencing to humans depends on other existents. As the stories of archaeologists tell us, establishing access in tropical rainforests is not always easy, even if the material dimensions are imposing.

²² Lefebvre, *Production*, p. 17.

²³ Ibid., p. 33.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Cf. eg. M. Fischer, “The lightness of existence and the origami of 'French' anthropology”, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4.1. (2014): 331–355.

²⁶ “Yet Nietzschean space preserves not a single feature of the Hegelian view of space as product and residue of historical time. 'I believe in absolute space as the substratum of force: the latter limits and forms', writes Nietzsche.” (Lefebvre, *Production*, p. 22.)

²⁷ A. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015, pp. 17–26.

most of those that concentrate around the knot call what I transcribe as *Wat Dhammakittiwong*. The presence of such a Thai Buddhist temple can be thought of as non-secretive secret, for all to know but for few to notice and thus access. The paths leading to the temple and interconnecting mostly Thai-speaking people are thus present without being present. A sort of closed society that is very open. For once one arrives at the Wat, people are very welcoming and helpful.²⁸ Just like when I asked the lady in the massage salon, who by giving me the otherwise inaccessible address co-created a path that invited me to participate in the existence of the Wat. This sort of non-present presence of Thai existents in the city is reconfigured only during festivities, to which I will return later.

Even when the conditions for first awareness arise, places do not necessarily give themselves fully to such a subjectivity. When I talked to one of the Czech boyfriends²⁹ during the festival of *Visaka Bucha*,³⁰ we talked about the *Wat Dhammakittiwong* and my research there. He asked me: “Wat what is that?” And then, “What, a temple? What temple?” So I switched language games and tried to explain to him about the villa. He immediately responded: “Oh! That meeting place of the Thai people. My girlfriend goes there sometimes, I don't go with her. I only take part in excursions.” I was dumbfounded. How was it possible for this man to not know that the villa is also a Wat, that it has a significance beyond a Thai expat club. That there are monks there and that people go to perform what is discursively incultured through the concept of praying. How was it possible that all he was aware of was the socializing, he did not even want to take part in? Is it all so utterly ordinary that no one cares? Or do some people not want to know? ... Or is it even impossible to know without having a 'correct', read open-minded qua open towards influence by contact, approach to such phenomena? After all I hadn't noticed there was a temple a couple of dozen of meters from where I had been living for three years. I wasn't able to perceive events in such a way to actually notice. My historical constitution did not enable me to see the way I do now that I have become a different historical phenomenon. I was quite literally blind to certain possibilities. In fact, for me as for most humans living in the city, there was no Thai temple in Prague. It all seems so far away now, that my Prague has changed.

But how did it come to this? To the eventuation of my interest in things Buddhist and especially Thai Buddhist. If there is an event that I could retrospectively locate as the one that served to create the grounds from which I began engaging with discourses surrounding what is called Thailand, it was when I won a flight to Thailand after attending the projection of a Cannes-award film by Apichatpong Weerasethakul. This was the first (and last) time I can remember winning anything. And because of my visit to Thailand, which intertwined with my previous interest in what Western discourses attempt to subsume under the concept Buddhism, and my

²⁸ Except for some essentially different non-discursive habits pertaining to communicating exact time. Again and again I was told a concrete time, at which I should visit the Wat, just to repeatedly stand in front of a closed door with nobody around. Not even following the Wat's Facebook page helped. Yet I never met any Thai that did not know when nobody will be around.

²⁹ Most Thai women I talked to informed me that they have Czech partners, whom they met in Prague.

³⁰ Also known more prosaically as 'Buddha Day', it serves to commemorate birth, nirvana and nirvana-after-death of the Shakyamuni Buddha in Theravāda traditions.

reading of post-colonial philosophy, that I decided that I had to educate myself about Thailand. Without this seemingly arbitrary event, I most probably would not have developed an interest in Southeastasian traditions and would never have become aware of the persistence of a Thai Buddhist temple in Prague.³¹ Sure, as a product of modern cosmology, I could just formulate the event in terms of a language of the arbitrary. Still, there are many ways to narrate (life) stories, that is how to create connections between things. “Thus things are not classified like facts, or tabulated like data, but narrated like stories. And every place, as a gathering of things, is a knot of stories.”³² Narrativization in terms of arbitrariness is only one of the possibilities of how to articulate what happened to me. Somebody who would tell a story of my life-events by drawing on Buddhist frames of reference would no doubt make use of the concept of *kamma*.³³

“[K]amma talk in Thailand has this ring of the obvious; any strictly wordy definition of it always seems to fall terribly short of the excessive meaning that even the word *kamma* itself can close off from your mind. As a result, exegesis abounds, and I will get to that in time; but there is also a truth expressed in the fact that if you press most Thais for an explanation of why *kamma* works, the best answer is usually because it does.”³⁴ Here I will do a little exegesis of my own in an attempt to explain why it works by drawing on elite discourses through which I have encountered *kamma*.³⁵

Kamma works not only as direct causation, neither as a sort of psychologized rationalization, which it became for most Western Buddhists, but it works over potentially endless periods of time. In fact by actively propelling past causation forward, through which it creates the means of further causation, it creates time. Reality, as formed with Theravāda cosmology, is an intertwined and intertwining process of past and future kammic causations.³⁶ Open-ended interconnection of emergent things is basic to Buddhist philosophies. In English language discourses this ontological

³¹ There is a Vietnamese Buddhist temple in Prague and many more people are aware of its existence. Partly because Vietnamese migrants are among the most numerous in the state and partly because the building looks like a temple and is situated in a Vietnamese market area on the outskirts of Prague, where you can buy things that are difficult to get elsewhere.

³² Ingold, p. 154.

³³ Thai Theravāda teachings draw their vocabulary from Pali sources, while Western discourses, academic and others, generally use transcriptions of Sanskrit words. To ensure intelligibility, while stressing specificity, I will use Pali transcriptions. Thus I write *kamma* and not the Sanskrit *karma*, but neither the transcription based on Thai *kam*.

³⁴ A. Klima, *The Funeral Casino: Meditation, Massacre, and Exchange with the Dead in Thailand*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002, pp.240–241.

³⁵ This is just a cursory construction of a non-totalizable, because open-ended epistemic ontology that continues to interact in and change with history, even as it produces history. Its openness is academically articulated in the many studies about historical plurality in Southeast Asia. For some of the ways that modernity was coproduced through Buddhist teachings to form contemporary Thai spatio-temporal realities, see e.g. S. Suwannakij, “Vision and Religious Space under Transformation in the Perception of the Nineteenth-century Siamese Elites”, in M. Dickhardt & A. Lauser (eds.), *Religion, Place and Modernity: Spatial Articulations in Southeast Asia and East Asia*, Boston – Leiden: Brill, 2016, pp. 270–289 or T. Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994.

³⁶ Cf. K. K. Inada, “The Range of Buddhist Ontology”, *Philosophy East and West*, 38.3. (1988): 261–280.

structuring is called 'dependent origination' or 'dependent co-arising';³⁷ as transcribed from Sanskrit *Pratītyasamutpāda*, from Pali *paṭiccasamuppāda* or from Thai *paticcasamupbāth*, the former of which is composed by the words *pratītya* or 'having depended'³⁸ and *sam-utpāda* or 'arise together'.³⁹ Donald Lopez writes that the “meaning of dependent origination is a more general one, the notion that everything comes into existence in dependence on something else.”⁴⁰

(Inter)dependent co-arising is closely linked to another one of the basic tenets of all Buddhist traditions, namely the one that is generally translated as 'emptiness'.⁴¹ For some, a more fitting word from within Western philosophical discourse would be 'essencelessness'. The world and its sentient beings are in a constant process of becoming and unbecoming/cessation. The latter is the reason for suffering, because sentient beings would like to hold on to, to attach to what produces pleasurable sensations, but since what is, will not be, even as, due to our attachment, we would like things to continue to be. While the problem of unbecoming or rather becoming radically different, that is being reborn elsewhere, is the reason for the soteriological practices conceived and propagated by the Buddha, such a being-in-the-world presupposes a radically unstable cosmology. That which exists, that is ontology, are laws governing the becoming of things. To be able to conceptualize such change, Buddhist teachings use 'essencelessness' to linguistically perform that that which a subject perceives, be it ones always emergent subjecthood or the seeming objecthood of phenomena, are mere momentary impressions within the productive flux of becoming.

Kamma is that which binds actions and reactions into a sort of continuum that is momentarily perceived as a subject, as an I. “For every action there is a return reaction (even for thinking this thought). The return on the original is far from random and unrelated to it. The return effect always carries something of the spirit of the cause – it is a descendant of it, just as a fruit is descended from a seed, and if the return is not forthcoming then it hangs over you, hauntingly, until the right conditions are present for it to reach fruition, to come back to the original giver.”⁴² Effects are linked with causes but are not identical to them. Difference is more basic than identity. Identity is a sort of false consciousness that arises for complex reasons (the elaboration of which would exceed the limits for this writing). To talk about self-identity, Buddhist teachings use the term *anattā* or 'non-self' in order to stress that the 'I' cannot serve as the grounds for ultimate knowledge, even if the experience of life often appears to be one of a stable ground.

³⁷ C. Olson, *The Different Paths of Buddhism: A Narrative-Historical Introduction*, New Brunswick – New Jersey – London: Rutgers University Press, 2005, p. 45.

³⁸ Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1872, p. 623.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1078.

⁴⁰ D. Lopez, *The Story of Buddhism: A Concise Guide to its History and Teachings*, San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001, p. 29.

⁴¹ Pali *suññatā*.

⁴² Klima, pp. 240–241.

Meanwhile, my self as a Subject is the product of kamma that is history. My perception of reality is produced by kamma, which structures what will be perceivable. Existing is “piling kamma upon kamma,”⁴³ that determines not only how I react but to what I can react. In Theravāda Buddhist anthropology, the process of perception is articulated as a coming together of three histories: sense-objects, sense-organs and sense-specific *viññāṇa* which is usually rendered as 'consciousness'. Each sense-organ has its own consciousness. Kamma can be said to be that which enables these three elements to come together, thus it enables perception and it produces the situations in which we perceive.⁴⁴ The kammic history that is me, is what made me win a flight to Thailand. Thus the fact that I have become able to follow the paths to the temple is too a result of kamma (and itself produces further kamma). It seems then that I have done good deeds in the past, as I am lead to participate in the space of a Wat, with an assembly of monks being an automatic producer of good kamma.⁴⁵

And since all forms are eventuations of coming into being governed by the laws of 'dependent co-arising', so too are translations. Whatever the networks of association for a concept like *paṭiccasamuppāda* are for Thai lay people, they differ from monks and differ even more from the Western academic tradition. Indeed, they will differ from one sentient being to the other, because each is a product of different kammic history. And the more the paths of two beings cross and become meshworks, the more they will be bound by kammic laws⁴⁶ and thus will be bound their understandings of concepts and practice. Indeed the metaphor of paths and meshworks seems to me to be a fitting analogy in the English language for Buddhist ontological structurations. The Buddha's sermons and the transformation of these into textual traditions are called *sutta(s)* or *sūtra(s)*, which tends to be translated as 'string(s)' or 'thread(s)'.⁴⁷ A metaphor that stresses both interconnection and production. This presumably has historical reasons that are linked with cotton and cloth production in India,⁴⁸ but also in Thailand or Southeast Asia in general.⁴⁹ Indeed cloth is of immense importance for Buddhist traditions, as the basis for monks' clothing as regulated by the *Vinaya*⁵⁰ and ordinary white cotton strings are used in rituals to transfer power.⁵¹ Thus, dear reader, we find ourselves returning to the scene with which I began this chapter, where the bright saffron colors of Thai monks' robes created the sense-impression

⁴³ Ibid., p. 236.

⁴⁴ Cf. Y. Karunadasa, *Buddhist Analysis of Matter*, Colombo: Department of Cultural Affairs, 1967.

⁴⁵ Cf. J. T. McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost & The Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011, p. 114.

⁴⁶ S. Cate & L. Lefferts, “Becoming Active/Active Becoming: Prince Vessantara Scrolls and the Creation of a Moral Community”, in J. Bautista (ed.), *The Spirit of Things: Materiality and Religious Diversity in Southeast Asia*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012, pp. 165–182, p. 178.

⁴⁷ Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1872, p. 1241.

⁴⁸ J. Roche, *The International Cotton Trade*, Cambridge: Woodhead Publishing, 1994, pp. 4–5.

⁴⁹ S. Cate & L. Lefferts, p. 174.

⁵⁰ The *Vinaya* is of the three *piṭaka* or 'baskets' of the Pali Canon and it speaks about issues of monastic discipline. (Cf. P. Williams & A. Tribe, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition*, London – New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 31–32.)

⁵¹ D. K. Swearer, *Becoming the Buddha: The Ritual of Image Consecration in Thailand*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004, pp. 14–19.

that led me on the path that eventuated in me writing these, and the upcoming, yet already written, sentences.

II. Doublings, or How Ordinariness Made Me Notice

“The anthropologist sets out expecting to see rituals performed with reverence, to say the least. He finds himself in the role of the agnostic sightseer in St. Peter’s, shocked at the disrespectful clatter of the adults and the children playing Roman shovehalfpenny on the floor stones.”

- Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*

Around the time when Spring usually visits the city, the Thai community gathers for two festivals centered around the Wat Dhammakittiwong. Towards the end of February, when the daytime temperatures even in the north of Thailand average above 30 degrees, was the time for *Makha Bucha*, the festival of the full moon day in the third lunar month of the year according to the Thai lunar calendar. On this day, according to tradition, ten months after the Buddha achieved enlightenment four auspicious events occurred. Meanwhile, in Prague, the daytime temperatures average around three degrees and oftentimes it seems as the dull gray of the snowless Winter days wants to press on until the ends of March. In this weather, it seems unlikely that any auspicious events might occur. More than a month later, during the second week of April, the days are still cold, even though the winter coats are stowed away. In Thailand it is time for the annual *Songkran* festival, the traditional Thai New Years, the date of which has been set from April 13 through April 15 according to the solar calendar.⁵² In the global mediascape, this is perhaps the most famous Thai festival. It involves the throwing, squirting, splashing of copious amounts of water on people. Also, as any glance into newspapers around mid-April will show, it is a prime event for the Thai authorities to fine people on charges of indecency, since water combined with raucous behavior in hot weather lead to nudity. Although it is well-known that before contemporary nation-states were formed around European notions of civility, the customs in most of Southeast Asia only required the covering of genital areas,⁵³ it is equally well-known that states and some classes nowadays police the borders of visual decency with almost Victorian zeal. As the reforms in the middle of the past century show, modernity in Siam is closely tied with Westernized clothing and gendering standards, as well as refashioning these standards through what has come to be regarded as traditional clothing.⁵⁴

⁵² In the geographical area of Thailand it is said to coincide with the end of dry season, which lasts from October to April. (Cf. D. Swearer, *Wat Haripūñjaya: A Study of the Royal Temple of the Buddha’s Relic, Lamphun, Thailand*, Missoula: Scholars Press, 1974, p. 51.)

⁵³ Cf. A. Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680: Volume One – The Lands Below the Winds*, New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 1988, p. 86.

⁵⁴ Cf. e.g. M. Peleggi, “Refashioning Civilization: Dress and Bodily Practice in Thai Nation-Building”, in M. Roces & L. Edwards (eds.), *The Politics of Dress in Asia and the Americas*, Brighton – Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2007, pp. 66–80.

Still, now in April, here in Prague, with temperatures reaching 10 degrees during the day on average, possible limitations imposed by official authorities are but a distant possibility. The combination of fresh morning temperatures of a blossoming Spring, not to mention those cold, overcast February days, and community size reframe the performance of *Makha Bucha* and *Songkran*. These conditions are to a large degree external to the situations, in that attendants have very little influence over them. And such constraints give any activities an experimental character. They serve to dehabitualize habits, to foreground processes of compromise that are both conscious and unconscious. And, while all that I witnessed was new to me, what surprised me most of all was the utter ordinariness of these extraordinary proceedings.

Before writing anything about how the concrete ritual scripts came to be realized, as in made real, in those still cool days before flowers in Mitteleuropa start to bloom, it will be necessary to present some notes on the role of *bun* and *bap*, or as transcribed from Pali *puñña* and *papa* respectively, that is merit and demerit, in Theravāda cosmologies and practices. This opens up further issues, since “despite having certain cultural axioms, there is not core of Thai Buddhism.”⁵⁵ One of the core axioms or basic shared concepts shaping the world of those we denotatively classify as Theravāda Buddhist is *sasana phut*.⁵⁶ *Sasana phut*, usually conventionally translated (while forgetting that translation is necessarily non-identical) as Buddhism and *sasana* more specifically as religion, is one of the many ways of interacting the world. An alternative translation of *sasana* to religion, and I believe more in line with its ways, is teaching(s).⁵⁷ It is something one follows, one practices and by practice becomes constituted by and with. “Thai Buddhists often define themselves by what they do rather than what they believe.”⁵⁸ Practice is not something one is (e.g. Christian or Buddhist), nor is something one has (e.g. Buddhist identity), both of which create an interior/exterior distinction that is not a necessary ontological precondition for being in the world.

As a teaching, it is one among many,⁵⁹ the other influential one being the way of the spirits or *sasana phii*, even if it takes on a central role in the emergent articulations of practice

⁵⁵ McDaniel, p. 15.

⁵⁶ It is by now commonly accepted that Theravāda, not to mention Buddhism, does not have a homogeneous and consistent historical referent. Peter Skilling, for example, shows that one of the reasons for which there was no Theravāda identity, is because identities require an other through which to formulate itself, which was a notion that was lacking prior to modernity, and, I dare say, is consistent with Theravāda cosmology, as one now calls it. (Cf. P. Skilling, “King Rama I and Wat Phra Chetuphon: the Buddha-sasana in Early Bangkok”, in P. Skilling et al. (eds.), *How Theravāda is Theravāda? Exploring Buddhist Identities*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2012, pp. 297–353.)

⁵⁷ P. Skilling, “For merit and Nirvana: The production of art in the Bangkok Period,” *Arts Asiatiques* 62 (2007): 76–95, p. 78.

⁵⁸ McDaniel, p. 13.

⁵⁹ One among many even in what we classify as Buddhist teachings. As Steven Collins writes about the “idea of multiple Buddhas, past and present, is inherent in the logic of all Buddhist thought”, “each Buddha discovers the enlightening Truth (*Dhamma*) for himself, and then founds his own *sāsana*, a historically specific Teaching or Dispensation, which lasts through time but comes to an end; and then, after an interval of indeterminate length, another Buddha occurs, to do the same thing.” (S. Collins, *Nirvana: Concept, Imagery, Narrative*, Cambridge – New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 115.)

and, since Modernity, increasingly identity. According to this teaching, *kamma* (Th. *kam*) is a basic concept that can be rendered as action, but not “the result of action as often wrongly conceived by western authors.”⁶⁰ The actions one takes automatically produce *kamma*, which is either good or bad. The goal is for the production of *kamma* to cease, so that the subject which is not will no longer be created, held together through *kamma*. The ways to achieve this are manifold, becoming a monk being the most reliable one. Or so it is said. Now, *kamma* and *puñña/papa* are intimately intertwined. *Kamma* “accounts for these processes of cause and effect. But intervention in this process is possible, through building up beneficial mind-states during individual acts such as kindness, generosity, charity, direct cultivation of the mind, and – by far the most widely practiced form of religious observance in Thailand – 'merit making' and 'merit sharing' (*tam bun*, *phrae bun*). Merit sharing is intersubjective *kamma*: dedication to others, especially to relatives and the dead, of the effects of meritorious deeds including but not limited to alms giving to monks, nuns, and temples, observance of Buddhist austerities, and meditation.”⁶¹ One of the reasons to participate not just in concrete rituals, but in events at which monks are present in general, is making and sharing merit. Both *Makha Bucha* and *Songkran* are organized by the Wat Dhammakittiwong and ritual activities involving merit are integral to them. And *bun* is transferred to the dead, who cannot create merit themselves, to better their future rebirths. Merit-transference is only part of what I experienced at the Wat, because gifts qua material objects are transferred too.

This is where ontology gets jumbled – for what exactly is being transferred to whom on what grounds is a contested issue. Both academically and among practitioners. Or perhaps contested is not the correct word for the latter, as many explanations appear to co-exist without the need for one to become dominant, just as many teachings coexist. What not all agree with is that it is the gifts, or (if I am allowed to tentatively formulate it in the philosophical framework proposed by Michael Taussig)⁶² their spiritual copies that are being transferred and instead some claim that only merit is being transferred and the gifts are there solely for the monks.⁶³ At the Wat, when asked to explain what they do, people, after coming up with what I deemed an insufficient answer, would tell me: “You should go ask the monks, they will tell you.” And then go on with whatever act people are currently performing. My inquisitive stance, my putting others in a position to speak about things so common, they are unsure how to do so, was at times inverted. One day, one of the laywomen had her birthday, and she asked me: “Why are birthday cakes round?” I tried to come up with a pragmatic answer: “Because plates are round.” This of course does nothing but defer the answer on another round object, without engaging with the basic form of roundness. Another woman said: “Because the sun has a round shape. Cakes have

⁶⁰ Nyanalotika, *Buddhist Dictionary*, Colombo: Frewin and Co., 1972, p. 130.

⁶¹ Klima, p. 139.

⁶² M. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, London – New York: Routledge, 1993, pp. 116 ff.

⁶³ In Laotian traditions, which share more than just linguistic affinities, the situation is apparently similar. (Cf. P. Ladwig, “Can Things Reach the Dead? The Ontological Status of Objects and the Study of Lao Buddhist ghost festivals”, in K. Endres & A. Lauser (eds.), *Engaging the Spirit World in Modern Southeast Asia*, New York – Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012, pp. 19–41.

the form of the sun.” She could have written some religious studies classics. And while her answer was undoubtedly better than mine, one wonders, why just the sun and not the moon? Why not all round shapes? Is roundness ontologically or epistemologically prior to the sun and the cake, or secondary? More importantly, I felt what it would be like when some anthropologist character comes and asks me about things I never gave much thought. It was only later, while baking, that a pragmatic reason dawned on me. Just make some dough that rises and it will give you an answer too. Now imagine a question of a more basic type, for example: “Why do you celebrate personal birthdays?”

Whatever the discursively articulated explanation of the workings of merit transference may be, and one must not forget that while words do things and one must learn how to do things with words, the medium of linguistic articulation is non-identical with that of material action. That is, I did not need to cognitively know how, it was enough to bodily, performatively know how to act. As regards this materially performative forming, I was usually the only one to whom performing such things was not a (yet) habit. Speech is both a discursive meaning-making (if not necessarily conventionally intentional) and bodily, material act. And the forms of speech enacted at the Wat were primarily bodily, both for me and for most attendants. But there was a palpable difference between us. The only bodily history present at the Wat that had not yet become tightly intertwined with the movements proposed by the specific ritual conventions. Judith Butler, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu notes:

“To the extent that Bourdieu acknowledges that this *habitus* is formed over time, and that its formation gives rise to a strengthened belief in the 'reality' of the social field in which it operates, he understands social conventions as animating the bodies which, in turn, reproduce and ritualize those conventions as practices. In this sense, the *habitus* is formed, but it is also *formative*: it is in this sense that the bodily *habitus* constitutes a tacit form of performativity, a citational chain lived and believed at the level of the body.”⁶⁴

All ritualized activities that integrated monks and generally also Buddha statues were very much embodied and performative. And, attending the Wat daily, certain movements or series of movements became formative of my *habitus*. Practices lived and believed at the level of the body. It seemed impossible to conceptualize this tradition taking discursive articulations as a starting point, and not from the point of view of embodied practice. It did not matter if I believed in any of the acts I performed, or if I had a clear idea of what was being done. I do not want to discount cognitive, that is ideational, modes of acting in and on the world, both of which are in propositional regimes all too often conflated with discursive ways of worlding, because despite being integrated into ritualized bodily practice, I approached, even had to approach what was happening through an intellectualist lens. After all one of the reasons I entered into this situation which far exceeded my power to decisively form it, was the still mostly intellectual practice of an (aspiring) academic. And while intellectual work is non-dissociable from the bodily, it is not

⁶⁴ J. Butler, *Excitable Speech*, London – New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 155.

identical to it. For Butler, a body speaks too, even as “its speech is not fully governed by intention. No act of speech can fully control or determine the rhetorical effects of the body which speaks.”⁶⁵ She characterizes the relationship between body/bodily speech and discursive speech as *chiasmatic*: “Speech is bodily, but the body exceeds the speech it occasions; and speech remains irreducible to the bodily means of its enunciation.”⁶⁶ At the Wat, drawing on the ability to mime, to copy, the body was formed to practice, to speak as a body formed explicitly by and with *sasana phut*. If and when such practice becomes habitualized, it becomes formative regardless of context. After all, it is impossible to “ever fully to delimit the context and thereby to fix the meanings or ritualized nature of any activity.”⁶⁷

So there I was, engaging in bodily practices that were still external, even as over time they became internalized, while trying to intellectually engage (albeit usually with a certain time-lag) with discourses that emerged from radically other bodily formations. Intentionality was always polyvalent. The body in its own speech often wanted to shift due to not being accustomed to the postures, while intersecting intellectual and bodily practice through miming the forms of the activities of my fellow ritualists often proved more difficult than expected. And a much less bodily level, the bodily nonetheless entered into anthropological and philosophical discourses this text is currently participating in. While for now the practice I became habitualized in did not lead my still Western sense of self to decidedly reconstruct itself in, that is become reconstructed through *sasana phut* practices, these practical histories have become part of the body and part of discursive speech formed by the body. It is not necessary to believe in what one is doing to be changed by it. Oftentimes people are not even aware that we are doing something, that we are formed by cultural habits forming bodily materiality. Just as it is not necessary to share, much less understand how merit-making and merit-transference works, for it to work, the bodily habits one acquires through practice will form a (not necessarily conscious) basis for the discursively articulated theories to make sense.

The bodies formed by Thai practices within which some version of merit-making a merit-transference was habitualized created a continuum with what they had been used to in Thailand. Such custom in other words, is “that crossroads where the constructed and the habitual coalesce.”⁶⁸ Michael Taussig calls that which makes this whole process possible the mimetic faculty. It is “the nature that culture uses to create second nature.”⁶⁹ Become second nature bodily habits travel with the bodies, while in that transposition remaining open to change, to different second natures. And, as Judith Butler argues, and I after reading her text remember experiencing it, changing second natures are chiasmatically intertwined with discursive articulations, which is the non-identity that enables both a discursive engagement with what is textually constructed as Buddhist thought in the first place, as well as the illusion of thoughts fundamental disengagement from bodily practice.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 155–156.

⁶⁷ A. Hollywood, “Performativity, Citationality, Ritualization”, *History of Religions*, 42.2 (2002): 93–115, p. 113.

⁶⁸ Taussig, *Mimesis*, p. xv.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 250.

The *Makha Bucha* ceremony in late February was one of the events, where the coming together of habits, prescriptions qua discursively articulated habits and material, cosmic⁷⁰ even, constraints/reframings of the possibilities by the location in Prague as a continual process of sensory articulation through various (unexpected) materially subversive elements was most readily apparent. On this day of the full moon ten months after the Buddha had achieved enlightenment, many centuries ago, he was visited by the demon Māra. He is the great tempter, the one whose name linguists sometimes translate as death. He who ten months earlier had sent his three daughters to seduce Śākyamuni Buddha, to keep him from meditating under the bodhi tree. And this time, Māra came to Buddha and told him that he ought to leave for (*pari*)*nibbana*. He came the evening before the day that *Makha Bucha* was to be celebrated. And the Buddha told the demon to keep to his own. That he will depart in three months' time. And after this, the *arhats*, the ones who have merit, that is those we call monks, came flying. There were 1250 and all of these became *ehibhikkhus*, those ordained by the Buddha himself. For “*Ehi, Bhikkhu!*” translates as “Come, monk!” Words were already doing things thousands of years ago. And then, on the day of *Makha Bucha*, three months before his bodily kamma would cease to propel itself through time, the Buddha gave his main message: “To cease doing inexpedient actions.” “To do expedient actions.” “To cleanse one's mind.”

This is how I was narrated the story of why we were at the Wat that day. This version roughly corresponds to the ones you can read in academic publications and on the internet. It was told to me by Peng, a Cambodian woman during *Makha Bucha*. She told it to me in excellent Czech. There were some peculiarities to the way I was told the story. For example, to “cease doing inexpedient actions” is not the translation one generally encounters, rather it is translated in versions such as “to cease from evil.” As you can see, the verbal structure is maintained in both versions (e.g. to do/not do as opposed to a substantivized account), but whereas the common translation reifies a substantivist evil, the way I was told is focused on performing expedient/non-performing inexpedient actions (*ne/prospěšné činy* in Czech), that is on actions that bring “a return to someone else, a stranger, some other person in the future (even in the next moment), to whom you might habitually refer as 'yourself'.”⁷¹

I was further told the reason for which Buddha did not say more than “come, monk!”. It is because he had too much energy. Had he even greeted the *arhats*, he could have killed them. And like the Buddha, so should we not blabber on in vain, but talk only when it causes expedience. And yes, I did notice that with the monks and some of the more active lay women. But others just talked and talked. How influential can such teachings be in forming a *habitus*? Perhaps I have overextended myself before, since Peng did not always make use of the phrase “expedient actions”, at times she just used the good old Westernized version, namely “do good”. She made use of both types of speech, switched between registers, and since our conversations were carried out in Czech or English, the languages through which by then she had come to know Buddhism,

⁷⁰ Cf. M. Taussig, *My Cocaine Museum*, Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004, pp. 43–49.

⁷¹ Klima, p. 272.

through which she articulated her own version of *sasana phut*, I am retrospectively not too surprised about seeming inconsistencies, since I know how difficult it is to consistently speak or write in ways alternative to reiterations of hegemonic ones. Be it the following of traces of discursive articulations formed by local traditions or the local, but universalized ones of English. Just like Peng, this writing of mine is an uneasy oscillation between different speech registers, without, as I think, a stable, dominant or (seemingly) pure ground. That is one that enables the illusion of transparency, of a degree zero.⁷²

Makha Bucha is the day to receive and affirm the *pañcasīlā*, the five ethical precepts, and the Wat has many more visitors than usual. People ought to bring *dāna*, alms, in the form of food, drink and things necessary for everyday use by the monks. The actions of giving produce merit. While the event began early morning, people continued to come and join throughout. Even after the *tham wat chao*, the morning chanting, began at 11:20, people continued to join. And received the precepts. It didn't matter they were late. Before the chanting, there was the event I was most excited to see. The two monks present on that day, Thiinit and Maawaa,⁷³ were to go on the alms round. In Thai practice, this should be a daily activity. But here in Prague, there are too few people to give alms, not to mention the difficulty of performing such activities in the European urban or rural context. On this special day the alms round was going to be performed, and since it cannot be done outside, a plan had been made in order to stage it in the Wat. The second enframing condition that had to be internalized into the emergent ritual script was the number of participants. In the ceremonial area, the *sala*, on the second floor of the villa, those giving alms to monks were to line up in a semi-circle and the monks were to pass them. Although the community is not large, on this special day those who could come exceeded the spatial limits of the interior.

Meanwhile, I tried to keep back, for I had not brought alms and had no desire to be integrated into the performance. To no avail, it seemed. Immediately I was asked: “Can you help?” Females are not allowed to touch monks and to make sure this won't happen, there had to be someone to put the alms into the alms-bags of the monks. At least this is what I was told. Reluctantly, I agreed. Half-startled, half-relieved. It did make me feel less like a stranger. So I tried to figure out if there was anything I should especially heed. Before the one who wanted to give me an answer finished her first sentence, I heard a loud discussion. Turns out, it had been agreed upon that one of the *mae chii*, the more than laywomen yet not institutionally acknowledged nuns, would take the task on herself.⁷⁴ All of a sudden, seemingly strict prohibitions lost their strictness.

⁷² Such doubling, of which I offer a specific interpretation, is considered typical of post-colonial subjects, at least since Fanon. (Cf. F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by C. L. Markmann, London: Pluto, 1986.)

⁷³ All personal names are my inventions, so as not to disclose the identities of my interlocutors.

⁷⁴ *Mae chii* in Thailand are laywomen who dedicate their lives to supporting the *sangha*, but who are not ordained as *bhikkhuni* that is as female monks (for the unified Thai *sangha* does not acknowledge any lineage for this female monks). They shave their heads and wear white or light purple robes. (Cf. P. Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, Oxford – New York: Berg, 2000, pp. 76–77) In Prague however, these laywomen in white or purple do not shave their heads and do not always wear their robes. Most of those coming to the Wat everyday turned out to be *mae chii* in this sense.

The dimensions of the room make it possible for only about eight to ten lay people to engage in the alms rounds. Luckily for now, that was the number of those who made it to the *sala*. Even before the semi-circle was half-formed, and I tried to write down what I noticed in my notebook, I was approached again. “Could you please take photos? Normally, one of us does it, but now it is not possible.” Of course, I couldn't refuse! “Please, take photos of us during the act of giving alms.” So, I took pictures. They are on the Wat's Facebook profile now. People thus lined up and the monks walked a circle, after which other people lined up so that monks could go again. When the monks' bags were full, they put the things they had received into the adjacent kitchen.

Even before the alms giving rounds, the lay women asked for the precepts. This happened around 10:00. Requesting the precepts was done by each woman and man for herself. While accepting the precepts, one has to say “*sāṭhu*”, which Peng translated as “I accept.” Uttering these words shares the merit from accepting *Pañcasīla* with the dead.⁷⁵ Then all participants bowed three times to the Buddha and three times to the monks. This was followed by the standard chanting. Those who came late took the vows during the sermon that follows chanting. These conventions were shared by all. What was not shared, was how one ought to be dressed in order to take the vows. No jewelry or other such adornments are allowed. Neither are all types of clothes. As the people came pouring in, some of those I had never seen before were dressed as if going to a party. One even came in a mini-skirt (in February, nonetheless!) and with an amount of jewelry I found it hard to believe. It was the first time I saw someone showing off material wealth. Thus, despite most Thai I met telling me that Thai like to show off their wealth through objects and especially adorned surfaces, it was only then and there that I actually encountered a Thai that fit the description.

The woman bargained for every piece of jewelry. “This one too? Really?” “Yes, everything.” It was hard to believe this probably wasn't the first time for her attending *Makha Bucha*. I couldn't get to interview her, so I can't tell why her ideas of appropriate demeanor appeared to differ so much from the rest. In the end, she even gave up her Buddha amulet. “Even Buddha? How come, since today's about Buddha?” “Yes, even Buddha.” She took off the amulet and put on a robe to cover her relatively minimal clothing. Nobody appeared to feel the need to talk about this. We all laughed more with every item she kept asking about and then got on with our business. Which meant for most to sit and to talk. People are always chatting, or keeping busy with their smartphones. Even during chanting there was almost always somebody talking somewhere, usually in an adjacent room, but they were audible to me. And during the sermon after chanting, some talked in low voices, on *Makha Bucha* and other days I visited. Many did listen to the sermons, and many attended to their smartphones, and nobody, not even the monks Thiinit and Maawaa minded those talking about other things.

⁷⁵ J. S. Walters, “Communal Karma and Karmic Community in Theravāda Buddhist History”, in J. C. Holt et al. (eds.), *Constituting Communities: Theravāda Buddhism and the Religious cultures of South and Southeast Asia*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2003, pp. 9–40, p. 20.

As the morning went on towards midday, people kept coming in, joining the group and requesting the precepts. Thiinit, the younger monk of the two monks, the one who talked more, was the one giving a sermon that day. He asked those attending if they knew the three points of Buddha's message I wrote about above. He then went on to explain them. He stressed that human sentients, unlike animal sentients, have a mind and this mind has to be cleansed. Otherwise it will produce kamma. A way to cleanse the mind is through meditating. And by gaining merit through generosity, that is helping others reach goals. As I was getting his sermon translated by Peng, the Cambodian, who tells me that her Thai is not too good, I noticed that the ways people are bowing differ. They differ much more than on regular days when just a small group comes to the Wat. Not in such ways so as to become dissimilar. But enough to be noticeable. Movements must be practiced together so they can become unified, so they may become shared habits.

After the sermon, we all went to eat the food that was brought. This time, the *mae chiis* in pink/purple robes ate together with the monks. Usually, they eat together with the other lay people. But then, usually most of them are not recognizable as *mae chii*, since they do not wear robes. They distinguish themselves mostly by attending chantings regularly and by arriving earlier than others on *Makha Bucha*. The robes (per)formed a specific situation, which enacted, among other things, a change in their eating situation, which shifted from eating as part of the lay group, both spatially and temporally, to eating somewhere in between monks and laypeople, spatially at the same table as laypeople, temporally at the same time as monks. Despite there being many more people at the Wat than usual, the whole thing disassembled in the early afternoon hours. As always.

About two months later came the time for *Songkran*. The traditional New Year festival in Southeast Asia held annually on April 13.⁷⁶ I wanted to arrive early at the Wat, so as to not miss anything. But there were only two women there. One of them told me: "People are sick today. That's why there will be no chanting in the morning." So I waited around, still hoping something would happen. There was a new monk present, and he was much more timid than either Thiinit or Maawaa had been. As always, there was food there, so I was encouraged to eat breakfast. One of the women brought me bread from the monks' table, and some peanut butter. After I finished eating with the two women, I began to clean up the dishes and brought the bread back to the monks' table, since I had noticed that my food had been put there before. But I was told, by one of the women that the foods and dishes shouldn't be mixed, that I was to bring them all into the kitchen and keep them separate from those that monks use. The other woman, who was in the kitchen by now, was surprised that I brought the bread and peanut butter there. This was not the only time I encountered non-agreement about how to work with things that relate to the monks. After an hour or so, no new people had come. I was told that a merit-transference ceremony will be held in two days. Thankfully the weather was finally getting warmer. I left for work, hoping for people to get healthy.

⁷⁶ Cf. D. K. Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2010, p. 39.

Two days later it didn't look any different. Just as I arrived in the morning, two women were leaving. They told me they had been there for the morning chanting (on this day, they did chant in the morning and not only around noon) and assured me there was somebody around and something would be going on. So I went in, took off my shoes and still necessary coat, and continued upstairs into the *sala*. Even in mid-April the room was cool. In the middle of it sat two teenagers with whom it turned out I was about to spend the rest of the morning. Even though I was told a ceremony was to be held early in the morning, in the end it began the same time as always. The boys, exchange students, were staying at the Wat around *Songkran* for three or four days to help the monk. They told me that they do household chores, make tea, things like that. They can sleep there, which is possible (for men) at all Wats across Europe, as I have been reminded countless times by people telling me that I could visit other places and sleep there. They also told me that it's not only a nice thing to do, but helping the monk also brings merit.

As with all actions, merit-making and everyday activities are intertwined and impossible to untangle. One of the two boys told me: “In Thailand, people who go to the Wat don't know each other. They meet there.” In Prague, due to the small size of the community, most Thai were at least familiar with each other. After all, being from different towns, both of the teenagers only met through the exchange program and saw each other at the Wat. While telling me about some differences they perceive between the two locations, some other people entered the room. There was a special Buddha statue set up and people poured water over it. A bowl containing water is set up next to the statue with cups made ready for use. There were three small children running around. I can't claim to remember having seen these kids before, but I know that this is not the first time children were running around in the *sala*. The new monk had a timid demeanor which showed in the soft timbre of his chanting. He quite evidently lacked the education for chanting, because he made many mistakes. According to McDaniel, monks are often seen as fully trained when they can chant certain texts from memory.⁷⁷ While that may be so, from my experience at the Wat Dhammakittiwong, the texts today used as basic in daily chanting did not appear to be perfectly known by monks. McDaniel further mentions that monasteries are known for different types of chanting, from “very quickly” to “very beautifully”.⁷⁸ This difference articulated through schooling of bodily habits that enters into and forms the sounds and rhythms of chanting is much closer to what I noticed at the Wat. For the new monk did know which texts to choose from, he just didn't know how to chant well. At least in my experience. And this had the effect that the daily rituals were even less attended. Nobody told me this explicitly, there were just fewer people around. Furthermore, this monk was getting annoyed by the noise the children were making. The monks I knew before never minded and at times even seemed amused. In the space of the Wat Dhammakittiwong where there are few monks present at the same time, personal charisma and chanting technique plays a role in the constitution of the community and through that, presumably, in the upholding of *dhamma*.

⁷⁷ McDaniel, p. 134.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

After the chanting was over, the monk held a sermon about monks' clothes, on where they come from and why donating is important. Now people listened. His sermons were better than his chanting. A couple of laypeople donated new robes. In his speech, as it was translated for me, for I was only able to recognize some words, he talked about how the clothes are expensive, and how before, laypeople often had to work hard to get clothes, sometimes even having to take them from the dead and make the clothes fit for wearing again. Now, the time for donations came. The two teenagers asked me: "Do you have any money to donate?" "No," I said. For I had stupidly not anticipated this situation and my pockets were empty. So they half let me, half made me put my name on their envelope, while teaching me the ritual steps. "Yes, we are told from when we are little." One of them said. The other kept nodding. "Parts of how to behave are taught at school. Like how to hold hands and things. We will teach you." "Do you believe in this?" By now, I was surprised to hear the word 'believe'. But then, after all, they appeared to have a cosmopolitan upbringing and outlook. We were talking in English and theirs was excellent. Both come from lower middle class families, or so they told me. I told them that I don't believe, but maybe I will someday. We went on with the offering.

The monk burned the envelopes, after taking out the money, and other papers (the script used was not relevant) with names in a chalice and sprayed us all with water. I remember very intensely how the feeling of the heavy drops on my skin and on my shirt. During this activity, the monk was chanting, through which the water acquires protective power. Then the whole group went on with the regular procedure of *tham wat chao*, which involves pouring water from small vials used for merit transference. After the water was poured and the monk stopped chanting, all the water from the undercups was transferred into the chalice. One person took the water outside and poured it on a tree. As always.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Even in Thailand. (Cf. M. L. Falk, *Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007, p. 158.)

III. Opening, or How Thai Manifest Themselves in the City

“The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People.”

- Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*

One might wonder if Thai people are at all present in the city. Walking the streets of Prague attentively, knowing what sounds one is searching for, it can happen that one's sensory-motoric apparatus senses a whiff of Thainess in the air. If one is lucky, one can hear Thai spoken in the public transport system. Much more often than that one hears Thai country music mixing with sounds of busy streets and shops in places, where when one eventually looks up, one notices walking past a Thai massage salon. Otherwise, on average days, the odds of noticing the presence of Thai tend to be small. Once a year however, if you manage to get up early enough and visit the famous Charles Bridge, with its baroque statues and droves of tourists, one might not be able to miss the performance of Thai identity for the public sphere. On May 20, 2016 a large part of the Thai community – indeed it is the largest gathering I witnessed – met for *Visakha Bucha*, the day on which the birth, enlightenment/*nibbana*, and death/*parinibbana* of Buddha are commemorated.⁸⁰ It “occurs on the first full-moon day in the month of Visakha (April-May) at the beginning of the rice planting season [...]”⁸¹ Historically, it is said, that the “Bangkok elite attributed great importance to the events in the Buddha's life; hence they insisted that regional Buddhists observe Makha Bucha as well as Wisakha Bucha [sic.] [...]”⁸² Meanwhile other traditions generally preferred stories of bodhisattas. Attending *Visakha Bucha*, talking to people about it, watching them perform, one would never guess that this was not a common event a couple of decades ago. One does not even hear that the date on which *Visakha Bucha* is celebrated today was formalized in the 1950s among emergent identitarian thinking based on the cultural concept of Buddhism. Perhaps neither is surprising, given that the monks told me they have to pass exams after which they may apply for an “exchange visit” through a centralized authority that assigns them places in Wats all around the world. This triple anniversary is said to

⁸⁰ Swearer, *Haripuñjaya*, p. 43.

⁸¹ C. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 104.

⁸² K. Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in Twentieth-Century Thailand*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997, p. 34.

have been celebrated over three days, but “at the present time only one day is set aside as a national holiday.”⁸³ In Prague in 2016, it was also celebrated only on one day.

I was told that the meeting point is on the Malá strana side of the bridge, an area usually flooded by tourists. An area screaming Baroque kitch, that includes not just souvenir shops and a McDonald's, but also people dressed up in clothes that today signify the Middle Ages trying to attract tourists to visit the Malá Strana bridge tower. In the early morning hours, that is before eight, when the air was still cool and fresh, the street was mostly empty, with the medieval tower guards only preparing for the day. At the Wat people had told me that the procession begins at seven thirty, but of course, when I arrived on time, it turned out that there were only three Thai women there. The rest was said to arrive around eight, when the procession was said to start. By then the small street was filled with people signaling their adherence to the Thai community through their clothing. Among these, there were more (provisional) *mae chii* than usual, some of which I had not seen before, and one male was dressed in the same purplish robes, which in the cold morning sun were all but indistinguishable from white. This man pushed a small cart decorated with cloth made to resemble the Thai flag, that is red, white and blue, while parts of the cloth were formed into flowers that copied the structure of the flag more thoroughly, that is the blue was in the middle, with white and then red on both sides. On this brightly colored bed, sat a bed of flowers dominated by the color yellow. On these sits a Buddha about 20 cm high, in meditating pose and behind him a small golden stupa, just a notch higher than the figurine. This cart formed the front of the procession until the very end. I realized later that I knew the Buddha figure and the stupa from the Wat.

Waiting around for the procession to begin, I had time to interact with some of the people who too were waiting and who were not engaged in conversations in Thai. Only here did I see many of the partners of the Thai women who live in the area. In all my visits to the Wat I met only two husbands/boyfriends. One came regularly and never spoke, he even appeared to be hiding from me, because he never attended lunch with his girlfriend, but rather went to another room. His partner and him talked to each other in broken English. They were present at the procession too, indeed they were integral. Together they carried a painted image of the king and queen, both of members of royalty still alive at that time. The second Czech man was very friendly and he told me that he and his mother both took Thai classes, and that he always goes to Thailand for half a year with his partner, and that he supports her in going to the temple. He told me that he himself is not Buddhist and has no interest in the activities, but he thinks it's good to support her if she has interest, so he sometimes comes to the Wat himself. Although he talked Thai with the laypeople in the Wat, he told me it was difficult, because he was learning standard Thai, but most are from Isan and he has trouble understanding their dialect. His visits to the Wat coincided only once with mine.

It was then only here and now that I could talk to some of the Czech partners. They told me their stories and these stories were steeped in orientalism and chauvinism. What a different

⁸³ Swearer, *World*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2010, p. 43.

world from that of those I met at the Wat. “Oh, that little one is hot. Look at her, so nice.” One said as he gazed from the sidelines, thinking to create a mutual man-space with me. Then he told me the story of how he met with his girlfriend, while commenting the looks of the Thai people that made up the by now sizable group. He turned out to be just an extreme example of the other partners who came to watch the procession. So I told my self: “Well, at least they came here.” And looked around seeking to talk to someone else. Another monk had joined in, he looks of Western origin and his robes are darker than those of the Thai monks. Anybody would notice him, not just because of how he looks and the color of his robes, but mostly because he feels distinctly out of place among a crowd. His anxiety was all too apparent. But before I could walk across to talk to him, the procession started. Later, he disappeared without me noticing, long before the procession had ended. A true hermit, I suppose.

While we all were still standing around, waiting, the group was already attracting significant attention. It was not only the monks and the cart that attracted attention, but the laypeople too, for they were wearing costumes. Many among the women were dressed in “traditional” Thai clothes and one of the men, Jim, who used to work as a cook, but now is a masseur, had imitations of royal regalia including a crown on him. Underneath, he wore a body costume. After all, even in May, the temperatures are a far cry away from the tropical weather from which the traditions arose. Two other men, neither of which I had ever seen before, were standing next to Jim, one wore a dark blue shirt and the other a golden one. All of these men wore a *chong kraben*, which is a long rectangular cloth wrapped in such a way as to resemble trousers, and they were the only three men dressed in pre-modern clothing styles. These three were each holding a flag in their hands, a Czech, a 'Buddhist' flag,⁸⁴ and a Thai one. Of course, quite a few of those that attended wore regular Western clothing as they do otherwise.

But now the procession started to move, to cross Charles Bridge. It was almost eight thirty. The front is formed by people wearing Thai costumes, including the three mentioned above. The women wore *pha nung*, which is a cloth worn around the lower body and resembles a skirt. The first two women of this group held a sign calling for world peace in Thai, English, and Czech. Then followed two women, one holding a sign that says Thailand in Latin script and one that says Czech Republic written in Czech. They were closely followed by the three men with flags and two more women holding the six-colored Buddhist flags.⁸⁵ About ten meters later followed the monks, the man pushing the small cart and at their heels walked the *mae chii*. Due to the slow speed of the steps, it took this group about ten seconds to pass the same area as those in front. By now, there was another man, in purplish robes that look white, who pushed a cart with a huge speaker. One of the monks helped him adjust the settings, so that a different monk, one who walked with a microphone would be heard through the speakers. They chanted the chants I know from the Wat. Each *mae chii* held an object from the Wat in their hands. Then followed a group of about the same size assembled from women in Thai costumes, in muted hues of pink, blue, gold and orange, two carrying colorful bouquets, the rest luxuriously looking

⁸⁴ It is yellow with a red *dhammacakka*, the wheel of dhamma at the center. It is the one that hangs in front of the Wat.

⁸⁵ The pattern was established to be used by all Buddhists.

banners of all colors with Wats and elephants depicted on them. Some talked and laughed, turned around to the group behind them, the procession already tearing up into smaller parts. The women they talked to were a group of six, all wearing white blouses, and on average younger than the rest. I was still standing at the far end of the Charles Bridge, taking in the whole procession. By now the sounds of the chanting were becoming silent in the distance. I had been hearing stronger rhythms for some time, which were making themselves present ever more strongly. Right after the group in white blouses came a burst of energy.

The energy makes time present, sucks me in, entrances me and makes me forget about the rest. The chanting is now but a faint memory I am happy to have noted in my notebook. Now, I see the dancers. I don't just see the dancers, their moves infect me, make me want to join. The dancers present themselves as a group by way of being dressed in pink blouses and wearing earth-colored *pha nung*. Already now, about three minutes into the procession, they are joined by Thai in Western clothes who dance with them. Or try to, as best they can. The dancers are coordinated, they have moves they repeat. And through repetition they become possible to be mimed, copied, extended into space through the bodies of those infected by the rhythms. I notice some Thai at the sidelines consulting and executing the movements. Hands swaying, feet moving, left foot to the right and back, right foot to the right and back, three bouncy steps forward, and the same to the other side. And right at the feet of the dancers walks, bounces a heterogeneously clothed group of people who move in the rhythm, clapping hands, swaying the bodies with each step, up and down, up and down. By now the back end of the procession is passing the place I am standing. There are five boys with Thai drums, who later will tell me that all of them are exchange students, led by an elderly man, who sets the rhythm with his drum. All in brightly colored Hawaiian shirts. They will further tell me they had been staying at the Wat the past two weeks to practice. Clap, clap, clap, bang, bang, bang. Even as I watch the video I made now, in order to describe the scene here, make use of some mimetic magic, hoping that this copy take on some of the power of the original, I am transported back to the scene by the rhythms alone. Aural and visual rhythms. Some write mimesis is infectious. I wouldn't dare not to agree. I find myself taken outside myself⁸⁶ through the music and the rhythmic movement of the bodies. It undercuts my efforts to calmly, coldly even observe from a distance in my scientific gaze, aiming to represent, that is make a fragmentary copy of, what I witness.

But what parts do I make a copy of, when writing ethnography? Thinking of how to write the procession, how to do a 'thick description' of its sensory dimensions, of its mimetic power, its hypnotic pull, I read parts of classics of realism or naturalism. And reading these I was struck by how unspecific they now seemed, how much is left to a reader's imagination, how much one visual and aural forms one is asked to project into the text, to bring with from one's materially specific background. So much what goes on is subtracted, subdued, written off, or rather out, of the field site. Specificity, singularity, gives way to the universal discourses that proliferate in the so-called rational world of science. But the sensuous, the mimetic, the affective is not magically dispelled by ignoring it, regardless of whether it is ignored on methodological grounds or the

⁸⁶ Taussig, *Mimesis*, pp. 38–39.

ontological impossibility of translating it into written discourse. I think I know that now, being infected again by the rhythms that on page might seem neither too powerful, nor interesting from most conceptual points-of-view. Yet this “effective copying that acquires the power of the original – a copy that is not a copy”,⁸⁷ cannot come into being without mimesis, which in turn plays tricks and at times even leads to category mistakes, where that what scientific texts perform is taken to be the thing in itself. Whatever the thing itself may be. The beauty of going 'out there' into the field is to me in the opening up towards the unknown, even in the midst of my everyday surroundings. As the anthropologist Kathleen Stewart so concisely put it: “the ordinary can turn on you.”⁸⁸ There is beauty in learning that there need to be a thing in itself, that “things turn out to be not what you thought they were,”⁸⁹ but assemblages of elements that change not only in and of themselves, independently of my subjectivity, but also depending on how my subjectivity is formed. Mimesis goes both ways, is a “two-way street.”⁹⁰ What I perceive is as much a copy of what I learned elsewhere, as what I now write is a copy of what I had learned engaging attending the procession.

Now, this procession, at the beginning, was about 30 meters long at least. The radiant colors of the Thai costumes swayed as the group danced more or less synchronized. It was quite a spectacle, seeing them in the still cold sun of a May morning on Charles Bridge. The younger ones were not as able at dancing as the older ones. I knew the latter from the temple, and would have never imagined their bodily techniques to be this sophisticated. In the flow of the procession the differences between performers didn't really matter, neither was the energy broken by the constant taking of groupies by some of the younger members. Apparently, for some it was not enough that a monk was delegated as a photographer. Meanwhile the larger part of the procession has reached the middle of Charles Bridge, and some of the Thai went touch the statues on the bridge, as most tourists do. Tourists appeared to be as thrilled as they are confused by the spectacle. One passerby asked her husband: “Are they Indian?” I chuckled silently to myself, while changing pace in order to catch up with the front of the procession, where the monks were. By now, their chanting was drowned out by the ruckus of the streets. It seemed a quaint curiosity. The monks, *mae chii* and holders of offerings and images still worked the space visually, but they didn't have the energy of the rear part of the procession. After all, how could they, they are supposed to be monks.

In effect, there were two processions. Or at least the experience was one of two. One in front and one in back. The front, orderly, calm, as mindful as can be in a procession, with universal pleas for world peace written on banners, the rear, coordinated too, also individuating, pulsating, affective, bodily, loud, joyful, integrative. The basic dance moves were shared, but each dancer brought her own variation, which became more apparent as time went on. And Thais kept joining in, at the back. Many were taken in by the rhythms of the dance. It effected the progression of the whole. The front, despite walking in very measured steps, was always faster

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

⁸⁸ K. Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, Durham – London: Duke University Press, 2007, p. 106.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 251.

than the back. Even a woman with a megaphone who kept reminding the dancing part to move forward more quickly didn't help much. The walking was a movement of elongation and contraction. As the front stopped and waited for the dancers to catch up. By the time the procession reached the other end of Charles Bridge, I noticed that a nun, possibly a *bhikkhuni* for she was in white and had her head shaved, joined the front. She too, like the Czech monk left the procession before I could talk to her.

By now somebody put on Thai country music, it was about 9 o'clock. But for now the music could not match the ruckus of the rhythmic drumming and dancing. We had already passed the bridge, passed the places that began breathing the summer air that fills the area around the river. I watched the dancing, heard the music, and it appeared to have a basic structure with the rest being invented as they went along. Clap, clap, clap, bang, bang, bang. It now filled the streets that were filled with tourists as always. The procession drew a crowd here, as it did on the bridge. Some onlookers looked confused, but not uninvolved. Curious people were looking out the windows to see what was going on. They seemed to enjoy the show, despite at times having the look of someone torn from sleep. I wondered what they might be thinking, how they might be comprehending what passed under their windows. Right before the procession began its movement over the bridge, I met a person I know. He lives right above the bridge and he told me he had seen the procession annually for a couple of years now. He also told me that he never thought about who the people were or what the procession was about. I had to ask myself, why is it so difficult to see what is seen? Would I too have not wondered at all what is going on had I not already been interested? Was this presencing of the Thai community on *Visakha Bucha* so utterly ordinary that it couldn't elicit more than a cursory curiosity? Of this dimension I became aware only while putting my notes together. And since any presencing, not to mention festive presencing of minorities in public space, requires repetition, that is a time-lag, in order to well, become present, to ascertain the effect on said space as constituted by humans and eventually non-humans, would require a long-term study. After all Buddha was born and attained nirvana only once, so the possibility to access Thai presence in Prague and ascertain who, if anybody, stabilizes this access in any long-term way, will appear only once a year.

Soon we were nearing Old Town Square. By now the music that was playing from the loudspeakers was shaping the procession, it casually floated into the rhythm, become visceral, actual. Members of the procession began singing along. Only now did it become conscious to me that it was only one song that played on loop. I decided to check out the front, since we were about to change from rather narrow streets to the open space of a square. The two carrying the sign calling for world peace had already entered Old Town Square. It was an amusing sight, since at that time Prague was being patrolled by Military Police for a couple of months. One of the *mae chii* took out a paper, an official permit for the procession and showed it to the police. They deemed it alright. I looked back and took notice of the fact that nobody at the rear was aware of the procession having come to a halt. They were too far away and too caught up in the moment. Already everything was being reorganized. Once the whole group, that had by now swelled considerably, arrived at the square, they stopped the dancing and singing. Meanwhile tourists were taking photos, the Thai were taking groupies and visibly enjoyed posing for the tourists.

Some visitors even chatted a little with some people in the procession. The police seemed amused, seemed to enjoy the whole show, the character of which has now become evident. As the dancers lined up, the others formed a square around them.

Five monks, including the Western-looking one, the *bhikkhuni* in white, the man pushing a cart, and most *mae chii* were standing outside this circle, with one of the monks making use of his smartphone to make photos of the cart. The photographer-delegate monk mingled among those forming a square and, with a big grin on his face, photographed the dancers. Under the imposing figure of the Jan Hus monument and to the rhythm of music playing from the speaker, the dancers staged a new dance performance. This one was as if on a stage, no longer part of a procession moving through space, to which people would join. The movements seemed more studied, the dancers more concentrated, as if performing for an audience with cameras. Which they were, as tourists flocked to record the dance. While some in the audience were swaying to the music, I didn't notice anybody trying to imitate the elegant gestures. The open space was constructed through humans in a way that introduced a clear boundary between performer and spectator, which was not subverted by the mimetic, and neither was I taken "bodily into alterity",⁹¹ for I was never in danger of losing my then current sense of self as detached ethnographer during this dance. Why could that be so?

Walking narrow streets is a very different experience from walking the nowadays wide open spaces of squares. It would be impossible to stage the dance performance of ten in the material context of a street. That is, stage it in such a way that it is a show for an audience, for consumption and not primarily concerned with the performing of the performance, with production. It is only in the wide open space where a clear separating line can be produced, through bodies and other objects, between performer and non-performer. This distance appeared to minimize the contagious nature, of bodily performance. The sensual-material organization of reality created the conditions for the emergence of passive subjects gazing at active objects. Such an extreme dissociation between bodily and cognitive perception was rare for me, in the context of my fieldwork experience that is. At the Wat, during *wat tham chao*, there was a material and symbolic separation enacted by the monks sitting up front facing laypeople. The separation was performed by gestures that only monks did, but it was also destabilized, dissolved and integrated into the whole group in gestures that were shared, that had to be shared by all. Chanting, bowing to the Buddha. Palpable connections were being built, enacted at sensual levels during the *wat tham chao*, which is what I will be concerned with in the following chapter. Even in the aspects in which *Songkran* and *Makha Bucha* exceeded what I had experienced at the Wat, connections were also being made, albeit differently, for example through gift-giving, *dāna*. During the procession, rhythmic bodily movements made (some) other bodies yield and become part of the whole performance. This change, at least to me, was only temporary, as opposed to the habitualization of certain movements enacted daily at the Wat.

⁹¹ Taussig, *Mimesis*, p. 40.

This performance took about half an hour. When it ended, I noticed that the Caucasian looking monk was not around anymore. Again, like before it seemed that the rear was working against the front. People were shouting, while a monk tried to say something. Almost everybody posed for a group photo before walking on. All the females at the back were fired up, even more than before, all were now singing along to the one repeated Thai tune. As we passed through Celetná street, the vendors from the tourist shops kept greeting the Thai women and were greeted back. Apparently they knew each other. Many Thai work in massage salons around the corner. The band was not playing anymore, that is not playing independently of the music. The drumming followed the rhythms set through the speaker. The front still pressed on, if you can call it that. The little steps they took seemed perhaps a little swifter than at the start. The rear perhaps a little more lost in the moment, enlivening space perhaps a little more intensely than two hours earlier. Once we reached Náměstí Republiky, that is Republic Square, the procession came to a halt and people started dancing again. This time, there was no separation between performance and audience, even some Italian tourists joined. The drummers were still going along with the tune from the loudspeaker. The drumming added energy, presented the reproduced sound intensely. Tourists and locals kept interacting with the group, mostly to learn what this is about. Only few dared join in the dance, as did the group of Italians. This time around the monks were near the dancing. They seemed happy, content, as they watched the dancers. Time went on, imperceptibly.

Suddenly, the whole procession turned into a festive dance was called to an end. I checked the time, surprised to see it was barely past ten. It was time for communal chanting on Náměstí Republiky. So, in the middle of a wide-open, highly frequented urban space in Prague a large group of Thai were chanting in Pali. For a couple of minutes. After that people stood around. Some left so fast, I had barely noticed. Others, me among them, were still trying to figure out their transport to the Wat. What surprised me, was the speed at which the gathering dissolved and moved on into the Wat. When I came there, by car with some of the Thai women, a party was in full steam, the air around the Wat filled with the smell of Thai food and sounds. Only the *mae chii* and the monks had gone chanting, with a couple of dozen people enjoying the company of other Thai in an opened Wat. Back on the square, within no more than 10 minutes, there was less than a memory of what had been going on, as even the people who had seen the procession, the dancing and the chanting had moved on. While waiting for a ride, striking up conversations, I noticed how some women gave a surprising amount of money to a homeless who came begging. It was after all *Visakha Bucha*, a day for great compassion.

Situating the analysis and note-taking at the level of the sensual-material, before the jump to representational/symbolic thought,⁹² enabled me to notice that what in conceptual articulation would just become a procession on *Visakha Bucha*, was in experience (at least) two processions. Up front or in the back, it was like two different worlds. I was somewhere in the middle, trying to observe the whole procession, always being drawn in by the energy at the back. The only other actor in that position was the photographer delegate monk. The other difference, the one that was

⁹² Stewart, *Ordinary*, pp. 3–4.

expressed by symbolic, even if still affective means, was the performative celebration of Thainess, of Thai aesthetics, of Thai surfaces, including two gender-bending men in very heavy make-up. A rare enough sight in Prague. That is not to say that the part performing *sasana phut* as Buddhism for the world was not also Thai, after all the tradition's aesthetics are distinctively localized, as were all the signs that were carried. The banners for world peace were evidently in a universal and eminently political discourse, while being located in a local discourse, by way of being written in three languages, only one of which having a universal status. *Sasana phut* and through it Buddhism, are also a part of Thai identity-making, the ones that have more of a chance at being accepted as something other than exotic. Paradoxically perhaps however, it was the symbolically highly specific, but mimetically efficacious performance of the dancers and musicians that achieved a kind of identification by becoming similar of some of the people who were not apriori part of the procession. And within ten minutes after the procession had come to an official end, Prague seemed as it does always – without Thai people and aesthetics.

IV. Connections, Or How I Was Pulled into a Buddhist Practice

“Theorizing, a form of experimenting, is about being in touch. What keeps theories alive and lively is being responsible and responsive to the world’s patternings and murmurings. Doing theory requires being open to the world’s aliveness, allowing oneself to be lured by curiosity, surprise, and wonder. Theories are not mere metaphysical pronouncements on the world from some presumed position of exteriority.”

- Karen Barad, *On Touching – The Inhuman That Therefore I Am*

It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, mid January, with the sun not shining and a look of cold winter rain in the smog of this distant quarter of the city. Once again, I was on my way to the Wat Dhammakittiwong to participate in another of the daily morning liturgies⁹³ called *tham wat chao*.⁹⁴ Now, while these events emerged as morning ceremonies in Thailand, here in Prague, they take place at eleven to accommodate the small size of the community and the fact that few can attend in the morning due to work. I had attended the *tham wat chao*⁹⁵ before and right now I was as anxious as I had been the last time. The street leading up to the temple-villa was as empty as always, except for the remaining islands of black snow that fitted in nicely with the drably post-socialist architecture of the area. The only sources of color next to the red street-sign usually enveloped in thick, green ivy, but now adorned by a sad browned memory awaiting a Spring that was yet to come, were the flags in front of the temple-villa. As I walked the empty street leading me to my destination, I tried to remember and to make my body remember what I was about to perform. What had I learned the first time that I attended the *tham wat chao*? Pressing my mind to remember proved to be a good way to raise my anxiety to cosmic levels, but not a good way to actually remember. My mind was overflowing with confusion, unable to concentrate to such a degree so as to lose awareness of me noting these things in my notebook. So much for the continuity of a subject.

⁹³ McDaniel refers to them as both liturgies and ceremonies. Other sources call them rituals. I will follow a classification proposed by Ronald Grimes in *The Craft of Ritual Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 204). If one is to take seriously propositions about how the world works, i.e. ontological propositions, as based on Buddhist traditions, then Buddhist ritualized actions do not fit neatly into any of his proposed categories, but since I write this text in the English language, I need to choose a word, a label, and 'liturgy' fits the best.

⁹⁴ McDaniel also observes that the use of the terms *tham wat chao* and *tham wat yen* for morning and evening liturgies respectively, is a relatively recent innovation, which is “an attempt to standardize the daily liturgy of monks throughout the country, comparable to what Roman and Orthodox Catholics refer to as 'matins' and 'vespers'.” (McDaniel, p. 147.)

⁹⁵ *Tham* meaning 'to do', *wat* (in Thai written differently from *wat* qua temple) meaning 'routine, responsibility', and *chao* meaning morning hours between 6:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m.

The world one creates by studying and what one is faced with in the materially performing world can at times appear to be separated by such a deep, dark abyss that one might be tempted to let go of one of the poles and to suppress them into near oblivion. Or one is thrown by the abyss into such desperation, that one wants to give up on the work. But if Buddhism, that is the Western textualist construction, teaches one anything, it is that there is no abyss, because all is empty, that is essenceless. As I mentioned earlier, anything that comes about is from within *paṭiccasamuppāda*, a generative process of causal interconnecting. While *lokiya*, the everyday, conventional world might not be the ultimate reality,⁹⁶ it and everything it is constituted by is nevertheless in a sense real, because it is a source for *taṇhā*, generally translated as craving,⁹⁷ which connects the psycho-physical processes on which a notion of self is based to the physical processes of conventional reality.⁹⁸ The aim of Buddhist soteriological practice is to sever these mechanically forming connections in such a way as to stop the automatic processes of generative interconnecting characteristic of *samsāra*. To be able to access correct ways of doing so, one has to first be able to perceive *lokiya* as a reality where everything is connected, connectable, and because of that essenceless. Therefore one need to despair in front of the metaphorical abyss, for it is only real in that it currently causes suffering, but this situation can be amended. One need only find what causes this perception and build new ways, new connections that will not lead to desperation, but eventually will help sentient beings, be it one's future selves or others', which is the same thing, to attain *nibbāna*.⁹⁹

Trying to keep an older version of this in mind, since it was only through my field-work that I was able to formulate what I am writing here, I fought to concentrate on the scene that unfolded in front of me and pulled me in the first time I attended *tham wat chao*. I imagined myself in the role of a passive ethnographer – observing, interviewing, writing, storing on media. It soon turned out however, that what was performed at the Wat subverted my own script of the observing ethnographer. “According to the legend, [the anthropologist] can – indeed he must – ‘participate,’ so as to be able to observe from the ‘inside,’ so to speak ... [anthropologists] are meant to transmute all that into the practice of participant observation, which enables you to tell the informants’ story for them, but never, ever tell your own as an intrinsic and necessary part of that story.”¹⁰⁰ I could not escape becoming a necessary part of the story, because the story of the ritualized activities and the *Wat* subverted, integrated, connected with my story of an aspiring ethnographer.

As the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern, in engaging with current Japanese anthropological theory and mediating an anthropological classic written by Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw, writes: “... in rituals you both are and are not the author of your acts.”¹⁰¹ The

⁹⁶ Van Esterik, p. 69.

⁹⁷ Williams & Tribe, pp. 43–44.

⁹⁸ S. Anacker, *Seven Works of Vasubandhu: The Buddhist Psychological Doctor*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2005 (1984¹), p. 59.

⁹⁹ Klima, pp. 271–273.

¹⁰⁰ Taussig, *Colour*, p. 116.

¹⁰¹ M. Strathern, “Response: A comment on ‘the ontological turn’ in Japanese anthropology”, *HAU: Journal of*

ritualized actions I was integrated into impelled me to perceive myself as doing something.¹⁰² That something was both the proper actions I was so anxious about not remembering and my role as an anthropologist. The issue I became aware of through this encounter, is which virtual script it is possible to realize in any given context, which then co-creates the self one ends up performing in said context. Here, I barely managed to emplace myself in order to watch and contemplate from a distance (I did not want to be intrusive straight from the start) and already I had been asked to join in. Startled I tried to squeeze something out of me along the lines of “I am not Buddhist.” People just said: “It doesn't matter, come join us, this is fun.” In academic circles, Buddhist traditions are not considered orthopractical for nothing. What one does not learn from most of the orthodox academic writings, is how actively embodied it all feels and how taking part in such bodily practice generates a change in perspectives. Neither does one become aware how involving taking part in events such as *tham wat chao* can be.

There is always somebody around in the kitchen around the time of the morning chanting that takes place around noon. The lady preparing the brought-with food for the monks told me to go upstairs, that the monks were there. I did not want to go, I wanted to wait for somebody to go with so I could imitate them. Because I couldn't remember how to proceed. Soon, I found myself walking up the stairs alone to the *sala*, where monks chant and instruct laypeople. Taking on the endless steps to the first floor one by one, I tried to make myself remember. What words do I use to greet the monk? Was it really *namatsakaan phra aacaan khrap*?¹⁰³ How often was I supposed to bow to the monks?¹⁰⁴ How often to the Buddha, for a consecrated image of the Buddha is the Buddha?¹⁰⁵ Was it to each monk separately? I tried to unearth from my body a memory of the movements, but to no avail. With each step drawing closer it became increasingly clear that this particular culture was far from becoming my second nature. With each step an image of my future self causing some kind of faux pas became more stable. Then, I pushed the handle and opened the door. What a relief, I thought to myself. There was nobody there yet. The monks were apparently still up on the second floor, a place laypeople shouldn't access. So I sat down, even slouched from relief, on the red carpet and waited for somebody to come, while taking in the room with my eyes.

“*Kalatesa* is a Thai noun that means proper, suitable or balanced according to dictionary definitions, and politeness, appropriateness, or context according to Thai informants. It explains how events and persons come together appropriately in time and space. Knowing *kalatesa* results in orderliness in social relations, *khwam riaproy*.”¹⁰⁶ It is constructed from the Pali/Sanskrit word *kala* which is translated as (general, not measurable) time, while *tesa* is translated as (localized)

Ethnographic Theory 2.2 (2012): 402–405, p. 403.

¹⁰² Cf. C. Humphrey & J. Laidlaw, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual: A theory of ritual illustrated by the Jain rite of worship*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, p. 258.

¹⁰³ *Namatsakaan* meaning to pay respect, *phra* being used as a honorific for revered persons, including Buddha images, *aacaan* meaning teacher, *khrap* being the particle used by males.

¹⁰⁴ This is one of the actions that is most foreign to my Western habits. Bowing to monks and the Buddha statue? Three times, touching the floor with the forehead. It took me out of myself, made me very aware of my actions.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Swearer, *Consecration*.

¹⁰⁶ Van Esterik, p. 36.

space. According to Penny Van Esterik it is above all tied to etiquette, that is when how to behave. Which is of course exactly what I was so nervous about walking up the stairs. Etiquette here is something relational – one has to know what comes together in a specific time and place to know how to behave: “If you have knowledge of *kalatesa* and a full understanding of context, including knowledge about the people you will be interacting with, then you will not feel embarrassment or discomfort, will not feel *krengchai* [feeling of embarrassment in the presence of powerful people], and will be less likely to *phit kalatesa*.”¹⁰⁷ Of course, foreigners and children are expected to not (yet) know *kalatesa*, and Van Esterik writes about possible roles (mostly for men) in Thai society that enable to circumvent *kalatesa*. What draws me to this concept is not just my ignorance of correct behavior, but the “*coming together* of immediate circumstances in time and space in a certain fashion.”¹⁰⁸

Two months later, I found myself talking to two young adults who told me they had been spending a year in the Czech Republic as high-school exchange students. They also told me they had learned how to behave and how to perform ritually from early on. As Van Esterik writes: “Children are taught from birth to recognize *kalatesa*, lest they *phit kalatesa* [sic.] (make an error in *kalatesa*). But in my experience the concept is rarely talked about or written about, except to correct children.”¹⁰⁹ This is in itself hardly surprising, after all, it is common that one learns by imitating and repeating actions and behaviors, and that unless one meets somebody whose actions cannot be assimilated easily, one does not become aware of the constructedness of one's own experience. Imitating comes naturally, so long as one is not aware of it.

What seems astounding is the degree to which the process of learning and the contexts within which it takes place is backgrounded in much of scholarship. But once focus shifts from categories to practice, learning by doing emerges as a central issue in the process of world-making. Such blind spots are even more surprising, given that the unquestioned presupposition that everything starts with disembodied thought, was something that has been criticized by Marx all those years ago: “The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question.”¹¹⁰ Any actualized phenomenon, including those of explicit ritualization, is the result of practice, of work; it can never just be there giving itself fully to contemplation. Any access to a phenomenon too is the result of practice, of learning to perceive, learning to notice. And noticing goes on within, with and through sensuous bodies embedded in and not above reality processes. Learning to perceive the world and oneself from this immanent, practically materialist standpoint makes it possible to partake in phenomena through one's perceptive apparati not as unalterable givens, as subject-object divisions, but as actively interdependently emerging eventuations, or to use a figure from science studies, which too, like *sasana phut* attempt to show the essenceless quality of things, as “technical artifacts publicly constructed from heterogeneous elements, from devices and artifacts to concepts and

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p 39.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 40. (my emphasis)

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 38.

¹¹⁰ K. Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach”, in K. Marx, *The German Ideology including Theses on Feuerbach and Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, New York: Prometheus Books, 1998, § II.

interests.”¹¹¹ Knowledge, bodily and ideational, is not separable from the here and now, much like some researchers claim it to be for people reared in Thai culture.¹¹² This knowledge includes the performative acts of *suat*, chanting.

So there I was, sitting on the red carpet in the living room that now served as *sala*, facing the little podium on which two monks were waiting for the laypeople to settle. On their right, as viewed from my position, were golden and black Buddha statues and colorful flowers. Even though they were golden, the statues never shone as much as I had imagined them to, not even on sunny days. The organization of the present objects opened up only a couple of possibilities of how to place oneself. The layout of the room invites some types of actions, while excluding others. For example, the open floor invites possibilities of movements, of contact, of displacement. It also invites a seated perspective, and given that most people sit, it does work against a standing perspective, for one would tower above all others. As Webb Keane writes, “the semiotic character of material things means that outcome is not, in principle, settled. It is not simply that their meanings are underdetermined, but also that their semiotic orientation is, in part, toward unrealized futures.”¹¹³

While the arrangement of non-sentients and sentients opens up only some possibilities of where to sit and where to face, within these parameters there is a certain freedom of movement. After all, the floor is a relatively open space even within the walled villa with few impediments to movement. Except for the feet that must not point at monks, there are few strict codes to prescribe gestures for a *farang*, a non-Thai like me. Still, to find a comfortable position sitting on the floor in skinny-fit pants turned out to be quite a challenge. Judging from the constant shifting of the Thai laypeople, it was difficult for all of us to find the correct sitting technique with these modern clothes. That “we are not just clothed; rather, we are constituted by our clothing”¹¹⁴ became very present to my body. Indeed the way one's clothes form possibilities of bodily movement emerges as important to the liturgy as it stands now.¹¹⁵ To be able to sit relatively comfortably was important and to be able to move around was to be even more central, as I learned as the activity progressed. But for now, sitting there in my tight pants, only the monks in their saffron robes seemed comfortable.

I was handed a self-made chanting book in Latin script, while the few Thai people that attended had theirs in Thai script. Present were a group of people that I would encounter repeatedly during these noon rituals, they were people who by all accounts I would expect to have the chanting script internalized, since the same chants are used every day. That this

¹¹¹ A. Morita, “The Ethnographic Machine: Experimenting with Context and Comparison in Strathernian Ethnography”, *Science, Technology and Human Values* 39.2 (2013): 214–235, p. 223.

¹¹² Cf. D. Wong, *Sounding the Center: History and Aesthetics in Thai Buddhist Performance*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001, pp. 76–79.

¹¹³ W. Keane, “Signs Are Not the Garb of Meaning: On the Social Analysis of Material Things”, in D. Miller (ed.), *Materiality*, Durham – London: Duke University Press, 2005, p. 193.

¹¹⁴ D. Miller, “Introduction,” in D. Miller (ed.), *Materiality*, Durham – London: Duke University Press, 2005, p. 42.

¹¹⁵ Prescribing correct clothes has been integral to the modernization and creation of contemporary Thai identity as imagined through the elite that managed to form it. (Cf. e.g. Van Esterik, p. 99ff.)

standardization is a relatively recent innovation is something I learned only later by reading academic literature. The monks pre-chant and the group repeats. Chanting fills the space with a hum that permeates the body. As Michael Taussig writes on such a phenomenon, it “is as if our humming is a conversation with the hummings of the world at large.”¹¹⁶ The basic experience, even before perceiving articulated phonemes, can be rendered discursively as feeling akin to white noise, but as sounding through human bodies, like an organic intensification of the ever-present humming of the world. As when filmmakers must record neutral room sounds to later add to a soundtrack of a film, because it is disconcerting to have no sounds at all. But here, instead of first blocking it out and then adding the not-so-neutral sound back on again, the technique seems to rather intensify what is there, without the temporal dislocation.

And yet, despite the standardization ... almost every time I attended the *wat tham chao* something altered the even unfolding of the prescribed course. Not just because my attempts at chanting had a Brechtian distancing quality to them, given that Thai-Pali continues to be strongly foreign to my habits, which kept taking me out of, making me aware of myself chanting these sounds. Now, none of the monks ever minded if things didn't go smoothly. They always smiled and waited for people to be ready. At times the monks checked the time on their smartphones, so there is a schedule, but a minute more or less was not an issue. Few people that are not monks knew the text by heart, not even the *mae chii*. Once, a couple of weeks later, the chanting even came to a halt, because everybody, including the monks, or rather lead by them, began chanting the wrong lyrics. Everybody laughed. Usually, the event was made up of moments when people frantically browsed until they found the correct page. This chanting goes on for about 40 minutes. Hands clasped together, fingers apart. Conceptually, it is the same every time, but practically, materially, sensually, there is always some variation. Every actualization appears as a struggle to assemble bodily and ideational memory with cooperation between other humans and objects into a performance that resembles the one that had been done the day before.

This assemblage is open to newcomers, indeed it requires newcomers like me, even if the ritualized articulation is destabilized. The necessity arises on the one hand because of the small size of the Thai community, which shows especially during the little attended *tham wat yen*. And there is a more fundamental openness, at least when perceived through the lens of interdependent arising, that is *paṭiccasamuppāda*. Interconnected becomings from which phenomena arise as partial visions, as inherently unstable. Events as the coming together of heterogeneous elements, heterogeneous kammic histories. Here, causation necessarily means contact. Knowledge as conceptualized through Thai discourses “implies and is wedded to practice”,¹¹⁷ writes Stanley Tambiah. It is situated and changing. *Anicca*, impermanent, so to speak.

What enabled me to make these connections are the last minutes of the *tham wat chao*. But before these begin, the monks hold a *thet*, a sermon, where they talk about the teaching and about concrete issues they are asked that are not necessarily tied to what Western people would

¹¹⁶ Taussig, *Wolf*, p. 32.

¹¹⁷ S. Tambiah, *Culture, Thought, and Social Action: An Anthropological Perspective*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985, p. 122.

call religious. During these sermons, of which I understood but some words I had already learned or that were loaned from languages I knew, I began looking around the room. Some of the people present were talking silently among themselves, others who wanted to talk more loudly left the *sala* to an adjacent room only to come back for the last minutes. To the right of the door through which one enters the *sala* is a non-functioning stove from when the villa was built and used in as a family residence. It is painted in white showing no signs of use since the presumed reconstruction. Next to this fire area is a small protruding shelf on which brass objects rest, objects the mention of which I had never encountered in any academic work. So, after noticing them the first time, I was anxious to see them put to use. It turned out that these brass vessel, the form of which is akin to a vial with an undercup, were filled with water and prepared for use in *nam mon*,¹¹⁸ merit making by using water. This 'lustral water' is poured in memory of deceased persons to transfer merit (*bun*) one receives by participating in daily merit-making activities. As I was told by one of the lay women, who sometimes appeared in the role of *mae chii*, that is clothed in purple robes, and sometimes just as a regular lay woman, I have to concentrate on a dead relative so that the merit I generate through ritual actions in the presence of monks may be transferred. The focus is on the living helping the dead through these actions.¹¹⁹ So far so good. What happens if there are not enough vials, one may ask, given the inconsistent attendance at the ritual? It is enough to touch, to establish physical contact with the person pouring the water in the undercup of the vial in order for merit transference to be possible. The Thai ritualists attempted very deliberately to pour the water at such speed that it last for the whole chant of the monks. I myself, unsurprisingly, did not manage at first. When the chanting ends, the part of *tham wat chao* taking place in the *sala* is finished and the undercups now filled with water are taken outside by those that poured. This now potent water is then poured out at the root of a plant, preferably outside, but, as I've been told and I've seen, a pot is also good enough, so that merit is transferred to beings of the earth.

The way *nam* becomes *nam mon* is by way of the coming together of different actions in time and space, *kalatesa*. Once, after pouring the water myself, I was told to refill the vial I had used, so that it will be prepared for the next pouring. Blessing is not bestowed upon the water in such a way that the water becomes holy, rather it is through the acts of chanting, pouring and concentrating that it becomes an agent of merit-transference. Much like in Theravāda anthropology, where for a perception to take place, it is necessary for many different events to come together.

It was only during a later visit that I actively noticed that food had been offered to the Buddha who is present in a statue all the time. Every time part of the food brought by laypeople was put in a couple of bowls and placed on the altar before chanting began. During chanting these bowls just pass their time waiting to be activated. The moment that lustral water pouring activities are about to begin, one layperson moves to the altar, holds up the bowls in a gesture of

¹¹⁸ *Nam* meaning water or fluid, and *mon* meaning incantation or magic, often also Westernized as holy.

¹¹⁹ Cf. S. Tambiah, *Buddhism and Spirit Cults in Northeastern Thailand*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970, p. 191.

offering. Then, I have been told, through chanting and concentration the food is transferred to the Buddha, which of course is not just a sympathetic gesture, but produces merit.

After chanting and giving a sermon, pouring lustral water and feeding the Buddha, the whole group goes a floor down, to the eating area. While those that actively poured *nam mon* go outside to pour it to the roots of trees, the monks, who were the first to descend from the *sala* in the first floor, sit down at their separate lunch table. The food whose double was transferred to the Buddha is joined with the rest on the monks' table. The air during my late Winter visits was always a little cool, like it is everywhere in this villa, possibly because usually, there are not many people around to warm up the place and despite the heating being turned on, the air, the feeling is not one of homeliness. The food on the table is neatly arranged, and apparently includes meat-based dishes. Despite being cold, the air is perfumed by the dishes. Enough to bring back memories of Thailand. "Smells, too, excite memories and anticipations."¹²⁰ Even after a couple of conversations about cooking I continue being unsure of how somebody achieves these aromas, since I was told that they cook with ingredients available in Prague. I ask them where they buy food and I am told at Vietnamese shops. Without the sizable Vietnamese community it would be impossible to cook anything resembling the dishes one used to make in Thailand. But the community is here, and so are countless places selling necessary ingredients. It is as Lisa Law wrote about a different migrant community in a different part of the world a production of sensory landscapes that evoke 'a sense of home,' which incorporate 'elements of history and memory, of past and present times and space, helping to create a familiar place ...'¹²¹

In this perfumed air all gathered around the table at which monks eat and tried to establish contact with something that establishes contact with the food. Tim Ingold writes that for the phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty¹²² we see in light, that is light is "ontologically prior to the sight of things".¹²³ Similarly, it can be said that we smell in (aromatized) air. Even if produced by humans, smell precedes the subject and how humans work with smells differs between cultural histories, people inhabit different sensory worlds.¹²⁴ This is something one learns very quickly when among Thai people. As Penny Van Esterik concisely put it: "Anyone travelling on Thai buses quickly learns to stand beside a Thai rather than a foreigner."¹²⁵ She writes about the importance of smell for Thai self-identity, not just as directly

¹²⁰ Ingold, p. 95.

¹²¹ L. Law, "Home cooking: Filipino women and geographies of the senses in Hong Kong", *Ecumene* 8 (2001): 264–283, p. 236.

¹²² Alan Klima shows that while Merleau-Ponty posits an indivisibility of an experiencing subject formed in and through a pre-cognitive world, in Theravāda Buddhist meditation the goal is to analytically, yet non-discursively (herein lies the great difference to most Western ways of thinking) divide experience. (Klima, pp. 212–216) What both approaches share is the ontological priority of a sensually constructed and experienced as regards conventional discursive analysis. Those experienced in meditation would most likely agree with Merleau-Ponty in that the common experience of being-in-the-world is indivisible, they would not agree that it is the ultimate ground on which the reality process stands.

¹²³ Ingold, p. 96.

¹²⁴ C. Classen, *World of Sense*, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 80.

¹²⁵ Van Esterik, p. 210.

pertaining to bodily issues, where odor is something that crosses boundaries between inside and outside, but also as articulated by cuisines. For food is “a subject critically important to Thai identity within and increasingly outside of Thailand.”¹²⁶ And, I want to add, fragrance adds much to the whole experience of participating in the Wat Dhammakittiwong.

So there we were, surrounded by local smells of distant lands which never get as cold as it is here, touching the food containers, or the table, or at least somebody else who was touching the table. The monks meanwhile blessed the food with their words thus transferring merit and one person is running around taking photographs (there is always somebody there to take photos). During chanting it is laypeople or monks, and during the food blessing it is just laypeople. As before, during the water pouring, connections, literal, material connections abound. All the touching of bowls, tables and each other is weblike – from a vaguely defined center outwards. Everybody is nonchalant about it. The conception of bodily contact differed from what I was used to, even beyond the framework of ritualized activities. One time, when I spent part of my day at the Wat, attendance was especially meager. I was told, that most people were sick. And it showed, since even those that were present had running noses. One of the few males who attended semi-regularly, Jim, appeared to be hit especially hard by his cold. While I talked with him about his life situation – he recently quit his job as a cook and now works at a massage salon, which he prefers because he has more free time – one of the laywomen I became somewhat friendly with due to my Thai teacher being her English teacher, Petra, who told me that she came from an extremely poor family from the north-eastern province of Isan, gave him a neck-massage. I was told that the massage helps to get healthy. However that may work, I was struck by the situation in which an adult gave another adult a massage in front of a de facto stranger, that is me. On *Visakha Bucha*, when I talked with Petra, she touched me on my belly, while joking about being my mother. Now, this contact did not feel weird, rather it was spontaneous, nonchalant. The same day I spent a lot of time with a group of young high school exchange students, most of which I had met for the first time. They too were rather intimate in the bodily ways they interacted, which included massaging each other, without it giving off a vibe of sexualized behavior one could expect from young people this age. At least not according to bodily habits I was formed in and which I thus perceive. Thais are said to be sensitive of bodily space,¹²⁷ but the meaning and material performance of this sensitivity is evidently assembled alternatively to that of Central European conventions. I noticed these sensual aspects not only because they made themselves noticeable by working outside my classificatory conventions, but also because they were in keeping with the always present sensory and ideational contact of the *tham wat chao*.

After the monks finish eating – as people at the Wat tell me, monks ought to eat an amount that is just short of feeling full – the food, of which there are copious amounts available, is brought to another table to be eaten by the community.¹²⁸ The blessed food, for lack of a better

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 21.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 120.

¹²⁸ Donald Swearer writes that “the blessing [monks] chant concludes the formal part of the ceremony.” (Swearer, *World*, p. 163.) I however don't see any reason for it to be so, given that part of the seeds of the blessing bring fruit during the subsequent luncheon, which is furthermore always a part of the *tham wat chao*. That is, what I

word, intensifies the merit-making inherent in the sharing of food with friends and neighbors.¹²⁹ The atmosphere was always convivial and laid-back. The laywomen cook the food every morning before coming to the Wat, they told me. At around 1 p.m. most of the attendees start packing up, ready to go to work in the afternoon. Everybody takes some food with them, so that none gets wasted. Some, those that do not have to go to work, remain to chat with each other and with the monks for the afternoon. The number of monks that stay around for talking depends on their mood. Sometimes one retires early or does not even join. At other times, they stay until all people have left. *Tham wat yen*, evening chanting, starts at 7 p.m. and includes texts, that are mostly the same ones as during *tham wat chao*, but instead of sermons and water pouring, time is spent meditating. Even though I had never done it and was afraid of being bored to death, time actually flew by once I managed to concentrate. There never were many people around. Once, just as I was about to leave, a lone *mae chii* said to me: “You are (morally) good. You came in the evening.” Apparently, few people do.

For all the sensual connections, what goes 'deeply into the bone', what stayed with me the most is the chanting; “[...] sound invades us, impels us, drags us, transpierces us.”¹³⁰ At times, half asleep in the tram, I started hearing its rhythm. It had become a part of me, and in a way, I came to miss it now that I don't visit regularly. For a while at least, it had become my second nature. And even if ever so often it emerges from somewhere to press itself onto my memory, and I quietly become aware that without being upheld by material surroundings, even the memory of these sounds will cease being a part of me, just as unconsciously as I became accustomed to hearing, to feeling the vibrations of the chanting.

encountered corresponds to what Deborah Wong writes: “like most Thai ritual events it ha[s] neither a clear beginning nor a clear end.” (Wong, *Sounding*, p. 58.)

¹²⁹ D. E. Pfanner & J. C. Ingersoll, “Theravāda Buddhism and Village Economic Behavior: A Burmese and Thai Comparison”, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 21.3. (1962): 341–361, p. 358.

¹³⁰ G. Deleuze & F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by B. Massumi, London – Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1987, p. 348.

V. A Particular Universal, Or How to Think Of Buddhism as an Actor

“Making connections between anthropological and indigenous knowledge practices, or contextualizing them against each other in order to transform the former, plays a significant role here as this allows both a reflection on one’s own analytical device and an extension past one’s initial conceptualization.”

- Atsuro Morita, *The Ethnographic Machine*

Ever since I visited the Wat Dhammakittiwong¹³¹ in Prague for the first time, I felt these events pressing close, asking of me to reformulate how I think Buddhism. I can hardly claim to have been unaware of the academic writings taking both classical Buddhist studies and religious studies in general to task for their unquestioned idealist and ahistorical assumptions,¹³² not to mention for the ongoing suppression of native agency within both the Western scientific construction of Buddhism (delocalizing, while relocalizing within modern Western discourse) and studies of anthropologically localized (localizing) practices.¹³³ Such erasures of the particular and of the other being hardly specific to Buddhist studies, the eventuation of post-colonial, deorientalizing reframings of knowledge practices shaping Buddhist studies seems, nevertheless, rather belated. Perhaps this is, because Buddhism can appear as a special case within the historical constitution of ‘Modernity’, since, as Richard King writes “the existence of a world religion known as ‘Buddhism’ has been a largely unquestioned assumption both in academic scholarship and in popular conceptions of ‘religion’. Indeed, so convincing is the existence of such entities that for most people it is a part of what one might call ‘common sense’ in the West.”¹³⁴ ‘Common sense’ to such a degree that many Westerners become Buddhists of one kind or other. Thus, “it would seem ... that Buddhism, as constructed and understood in Europe, must have some referent in Asia, that it must possess a more stable ontological status than Hinduism, for example.”¹³⁵ The historical production of Buddhism coupled the common fascination with this particular construct and the seemingly evident evidence ‘brought back’ from Asia, thus naturalizing the category more thoroughly than that of some other ‘religions’. But again, this was part of my conceptual toolkit when I first rang that doorbell at the villa that is a temple. What was unsettling then, was not being together with the people and their actions that are commonly suppressed in many academic discourses, since this was to be expected. Neither was it the

¹³¹ Fd. 2010.

¹³² See e.g. D. Lopez Jr. (ed.), *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1995, or B. S. Turner & O. Salemink (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Religions in Asia*, London – New York: Routledge, 2014.

¹³³ See e.g. Ivy, Marilyn. “Modernity”, in D. S. Lopez Jr. (ed.), *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009, pp. 311–332.

¹³⁴ R. King, “Orientalism and the ‘Discovery’ of Buddhism”, in R. King, *Orientalism and Religion – Post-Colonial Theory, India and The Mystic East*, London – New York: Routledge, 1999, pp. 143–160, p. 143.

¹³⁵ Lopez, *Curators*, p. 7.

combination of utter ordinariness of daily routines coupled with the tentative creation of new forms of ritualization I described in the earlier chapters. Rather, it was the continuing presence of ‘Buddhism’ that could not be dispelled by critical analysis. How then to conceptualize its continuing presencing despite its ghostly existence? For that, I must return to that first time I entered into the Wat and was greeted by a surprised monk.

Soon I found myself sitting on the first floor, a room giving itself to me as evidently organized for ritual activities, taking in the sights, sounds and smells it offered. This first time, it was above all the articulated sounds that laid the seeds that eventually grew into the activity from which springs this little text. For when I arrived at the nondescript, yet very special villa, there was no one there but a monk of German upbringing who introduced himself as Bhikkhu Germanicus and who was evidently very pleased to be able to talk to me in German, the language we both grew up with. In our mutual conversation he was very keen on stressing that he was a Buddhist monk, which came hardly as a surprise given his neatly shaven head, orange robes and (mostly successful attempts at sitting in a) lotus position. There were other signs reframing the villa interiors into a Buddhist tradition – of these I wrote in past chapters. The thing that looked most perplexing was a rather post-modern looking fake flower with money in it. While under the untrained, orientalist gaze many shapes acquire an affinity with ‘Buddhist’ shapes, one learns that lived tradition is creative and generally exceeds any easy categorization.¹³⁶

Talking with Bhikkhu Germanicus was very pleasant. And, among the many things he told me was his life-story.¹³⁷ He told me that he wanted to become a deacon in the 90s, but turned away on the doorstep before the initiation. He also told me, that half a year later he was ‘hooked’ on Buddhism (introduced to him by a friend) and went to Sri Lanka. There he got a teacher. Bhikkhu Germanicus was lucky, he added, that the teacher wanted to experiment with foreigners to see if they would make good monks.¹³⁸ Otherwise, it was difficult to get a local teacher if you come as one of the lost, searching souls from the West. So he became a forest monk and learned Pali. Although he had been actively Buddhist ever since, even working on German translations of the Vinaya-Pittaka, he received the permission to teach only recently. Despite spending a couple of years with the Sinhala Buddhist community in Berlin, he felt compelled to leave it for the Thai Buddhist temple in Berlin,¹³⁹ because, as he told me, there was too much infighting and politicking going on in the Sinhala community around the temple.

¹³⁶ Material and ideational eclecticism is said to be typical for Thai Popular Buddhism. (Cf. P. Kitiarsa, *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets – Thai Popular Buddhism Today*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2012.)

¹³⁷ Which sits very well with the Western confessional impulse described by Foucault and elaborated by Rey Chow. (Cf. R. Chow, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, pp. 112 ff.)

¹³⁸ It should be noted, that various Buddha-dharmas that tend to be classified as originary, have been influenced, among others, by Western Buddhist studies and more generally by the ‘West’. Gananath Obeyesekere famously called this development within (Sinhala) Theravāda ‘Protestant Buddhism’. There is thus no originary, pure Buddha-dharma, and there never was. When Michael Taussig (see earlier chapters of this work) writes about the mimetic faculty being tied up with colonialism and tying it to the Other, a process wherein any one source of originality is impossible to untangle, it counts, of course, for all encounters, for all histories.

¹³⁹ Wat Buddhavihara, fd. 1995, which is the ‘parent-temple’ of Wat Dhammakittiwong. (See www.buddhavihara.de)

This year was the first time for him at the Wat Dhammakittiwong, where he was spending the three months of rains retreat.¹⁴⁰ He will come again the year after, since he rather liked Prague. However, when I asked him about how he likes the Thai ways, he was less enthusiastic. Somewhat annoyed by both monks (who according to him should study when not doing rituals, which they do not do) and laypeople (who according to him are happiest when they can 'sing out loud and make noise'), apparently happy to tell me that he does not even want to learn Thai, because then he would understand all the petty issues that the laypeople are talking and arguing about, and he does not want to get tangled up in 'petty daily squabbles'.¹⁴¹ Apart from translating, he attends rituals, but is annoyed by the long ones, as his legs start to hurt.¹⁴² He further told me that he doesn't perform any 'special' rituals for merit transference or luck, but he knows that spirits (of the dead) exist. He scolds Thais (talking to me, not them) for mistaking the way these exist and for performing 'senseless' rituals, for how can they transfer merit locally to the dead, when they are reborn elsewhere. He is not against rituals per se, but at least a residual anti-ritualism, that is said to be typical of people formed in the contemporary West, is quite apparently still present. I felt the strongest agitation on his side when he was describing his annoyance by the 'fake' Western Buddhists, who do not take the teachings of the Buddha seriously and take Buddhism to be more of a lifestyle than a path to Nibbana.

So why were you just asked to read this summary of a conversation I had with Bhikkhu Germanicus? Anybody who has ever attempted to talk to the people we in the West would expect to be Buddhist, has probably encountered the same problems as I have (both in Thailand and in Prague), namely that 'Buddhists' generally don't call themselves 'Buddhists'. When visiting Thailand it proved difficult for me to even communicate the concept of Buddhism. Such auto-declaration of one's religious affiliation that exceeds material signs such as practice and clothing appears to be specific to modern Western cosmology. (T)here a Buddhist is something one chooses to become consciously, it is a (seemingly) clearly defined identity 'out there' that one takes as one's own has to exhibit. Much like the sympathetic Bhikkhu Germanicus, who not only declared himself verbally to be a Buddhist, but who also told me that on the verge of identifying himself very explicitly (for him and for others) with Catholicism, was seized by doubt and then searched for another identity as if to become whole. 'Buddhists' is one of those that has become more and more available to those in search of identity. And, as this German monk made explicit, it still enables different ways of identification and practice. Few go as far in becoming 'ethnic'¹⁴³ as Bhikkhu Germanicus, which is one of the reasons why he seems to consider himself as better than lifestyle Buddhists, who for him remain nothing but Westerners. It is him who has become (a) Buddhist monk, who has in a sense become other, who is the 'real thing'. Even more real than

¹⁴⁰ Commonly from mid-july through mid-october. (Cf. Swearer, *Haripuñjaya*, p. 31.)

¹⁴¹ He told me rather emphatically about laypeople arguing, but for all the times I've been to the Wat, I have never experienced one such instance.

¹⁴² Which explains why his lotus position was not as steady as that of the Thai monks.

¹⁴³ "The ethnic is both the universal, the condition in which everyone can supposedly situate herself, and the local, the foreign, the outside, the condition that, in reality, only some people, those branded 'others,' (are made to) inhabit." (Chow, p. 28.)

those growing up and living in societies that have been drawing on and have themselves formed what the Buddha taught. That is in this case practitioners, adherents of *sasana phut*. But what or rather who exactly is he imitating? What is he becoming? Is it the ethnicity-as-object, the identities within hegemonic discourse that are open to non-whites, that is non-subjects?¹⁴⁴ Only partially – while monks in orange robes are generally formed in Southeast Asian cultures and as such are assigned an ethnic identity, Bhikkhu Germanicus made it very clear to me that he was only partially one of them, for the ones he interacts with are not even actually good Buddhists. While he does adopt, imitate some ways of ‘traditional’ Buddhists, he does not become one of them. Rather, he is somewhere in between, half-way, yet above.

He told me that most of his family were less than happy about his choice and some even stopped communicating with him. There were others, his sister and some friends above all, who were enthusiastic about his decision and continue to support him.¹⁴⁵ He has thus, from the perspective of the German conventions he emerged from, become (somewhat) Other, and the Buddhist robes and his participation in ethnic milieux perform this change. But he also continues to primarily identify himself as white and as closer to the truth (of Buddhism) than the really real Others. The insistence on a real Buddhism (and his rather exclusive access to it) is very much that of the classical academic scientific endeavor. If the Buddhist (ethnic) “is a historical invention, it is because he is a Western invention, which relies for its inventiveness – its originality, so to speak – on the debasement and exclusion of others.”¹⁴⁶ Indeed. And yet, since he attempts very earnestly to become a monk according to the, as mentioned before also relatively recently formulated in its current form, Theravāda tradition he sought to be initiated in, he is also different from this hegemonic Western (hi)story. What surprised me the most during my interview with him, was his very earnestness about the existence of what people in the modern Western cosmology would call supernatural beings. And about them being part of the karmic system just like humans. He is both Buddhist and buddhist at the same time. Universal and particular. Half-consciously.

Anna Tsing elaborated (and continues to do so) useful conceptual tools to theorize such complexity in her academic publications. She writes: “Global connections are everywhere. So how does one study the global?”¹⁴⁷ Buddhism and buddhisms (qua teachings drawing on a certain intellectual and practical tradition) come into being as and through global connections. Bhikkhu Germanicus is an assemblage of global connections. Buddhism as “object of modern fantasy and longing”¹⁴⁸ and “transhistorical religion comprising transcendent technologies of liberation, thus intrinsically empty of historical signification or cultural baggage”¹⁴⁹ is, to use Tsing's terminology, a ‘universal’. Buddhism, much like “[c]apitalism, science, and politics all depend on global connections. Each spreads through aspirations to fulfill universal dreams and schemes. Yet

¹⁴⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 24 ff.

¹⁴⁵ Ironic, of course, given that as a monk he ought to have cut all family ties – in the ideal version of Buddhism.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁴⁷ A. Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 1.

¹⁴⁸ *Ivy*, p. 313.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

this is a particular kind of universality: It can only be charged and enacted in the sticky materiality of practical encounters.”¹⁵⁰ And in such practical encounters the differences between Buddhism and what it is often presumed to refer to become all but apparent. Tsing further writes:

“Post-colonial theory challenges scholars to position our work between the traps of the universal and the culturally specific. Both conceits have been ploys of colonial knowledge, that is, knowledge that legitimates the superiority of the West as defined against its Others. Yet in studying colonial discourse, social scientists and historians have limited themselves to the cultural specificity side of the equation. *There has been much less attention to the history of the universal*, as it, too, has been produced in the colonial encounter. Here a specific valence for the universal has been produced; the universal is what, as Gayatri Spivak has put it, we cannot not want, even as it so often excludes us. The universal offers us the chance to participate in the global stream of humanity. We can't turn it down. Yet we also can't replicate previous versions without inserting our own genealogy of commitments and claims. Whether we place ourselves inside, or outside the West, we are stuck with universals created in cultural dialogue. [...] Nor is scholarly knowledge exempt; every truth forms in negotiation, however messy, with aspirations to the universal.”¹⁵¹

Indeed, in deconstructive Buddhist and religious studies less attention has been paid to Buddhism as universal than to the culturally specific that evidences the specificity of the universal ‘Buddhism’. As if critique was to magically dispel the effectiveness of a concept. “And reminding us that an effect is not thereby made powerless, but is precisely made effective: it is through being rendered the endpoint in a chain of discursive relations that a notion like Buddhism can produce its own effects in the world.”¹⁵² And for many, especially perhaps Tibetans, it is precisely ‘Buddhism’ that, despite all its pitfalls, offers a “chance to participate in the global stream of humanity.”¹⁵³

It was Buddhism as historically constructed by the Western colonial apparatus that brought both me, the German monk and the Thai community in Prague together, even if the latter may generally have little overt use for it. It is Buddhism rather than buddhisms that enables the Others to participate in the global stream of humanity, even as their participation is more often than not erased. Indeed, the universal works upon the world regardless of particularisms, even though it is only accessible through them. Both monks and lay people were a little surprised at my interest in them and their practice. For most of these ethnic, as opposed to Western Buddhists, what they do is not special and not necessarily part of some grand narrative. Some of those that had been living in Prague for a long time, thought that I was interested in the universal Buddhism and encouraged me to go do my fieldwork in establishments run by Czech Buddhists. Some

¹⁵⁰ Tsing, *Friction*, p. 1.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ivy, p. 327.

¹⁵³ “... Tibet’s global function as the once and future Buddhist utopia in the wake of Chinese occupation all point to the fraught crossings of Buddhism and the modern.” (Ibid., p. 326.)

could not understand at all that I am taking any interest in what they do. Obviously, I cannot go as far as to claim that Buddhism is universal to the same degree as Nature and God, for after all it is held to be of ethnic origin.¹⁵⁴ This continues to be present within a (Western) transformation/transposition of traditions of Buddha-dharma that is generally held to be universal.¹⁵⁵ I thus want to propose that Buddhism is a 'particular universal'. In order to do that, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of both 'universal' and 'particular'.

Nature is generally understood to be the 'universal', which is why it is useful for doing theory with. The concept Nature in today's world works, according to Anna Tsing, in the following way:

“How does the universality of Nature operate in a world of friction? I approach this question through looking at the *process of “generalization,” in which small details support great visions and the universal is discovered in particularities*. Two features of generalization intrigue me. First, *generalization to the universal requires a large space of compatibility among disparate, particular facts and observations*. As long as facts are apples and oranges, one cannot generalize across them; one must first see them as “fruit” to make general claims. Compatibility standardizes difference. It allows transcendence: the general can rise above the particular. For this, *compatibility must pre-exist the particular facts* being examined; and it must *unify the field of inquiry*. The searcher for universal truths must establish an axiom of unity whether on spiritual, aesthetic, mathematical, logical, or moral principles. Second, *tentative and contingent collaborations among disparate knowledge seekers and their disparate forms of knowledge can turn incompatible facts and observations into compatible ones*. Just as tiny convergences in incompatible testimonies at a criminal trial can establish a line of truth, the founding lines through which we learn to recognize Nature are often established in convergent opinions. Convergences offer legitimacy and charisma to nascent categories. They offer bridges over unrecognizable difference.”¹⁵⁶

It is further illuminating to read the Japanese philosopher Kōjin Karatani on the issue of universality: “Kant drew a keen distinction between universality and generality [...]. While generality can be abstracted from experience, universality cannot be attained *if not for a certain*

¹⁵⁴ “Many things are said to be universal: freedom, money, love. But the two most historically successful universal claims – which continue to form exemplars for all universality – are still God and Nature. The universality of God and the universality of Nature are historically connected; in the European Renaissance, the stirrings of modern science conceived the latter on the model of the former. Only because God was known to be universal could Nature be depicted that way. The connection between God and Nature has continued to inspire the musings of theologians, scientists, and naturalists, reminding us of the importance of reason and mystery in appreciating each domain.” (Tsing, *Friction*, p. 88.)

¹⁵⁵ Dharma is used to mean many things, among others the teachings of the Buddha. As such I used it here as an umbrella term that includes *sasana phut* but also traditions that draw on other sets of texts making up the putative Buddhist canon.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 89 ff. (her emphasis)

*leap.*¹⁵⁷ Generality is quantified particulars, universality is more, is other. It is transcendental. Karatani criticizes romantic (post-Kantian) philosophers, for whom the particular is only a determined universal.¹⁵⁸ Following the traditional Marxist critique of idealist positions, such thought processes reiterate and thus performatively reinstate the illusion of a top-down pattern, while, since being produced by humans and not by God, they are actually bottom-up, that is historically formed. What Karatani argues and articulates, exceeds this critique, for he guides the reader to learn to be able to perceive a distinction between the general and the universal, which is a distinction that the Romantics explicitly conflated. But the general is still historical, while the universal would be ahistorical. It requires a leap. This mistaken identification is also the ground for the metaphysical conceptualization of the particular – it is secondary to the universal, it is determined by it. In order to evade the static idealism of bourgeois thought, it is necessary to grasp oneself and any putative subject of study from below, from within the particular. What more, each individual, each thing, is singular – there is no other that would be identical. To be comparable, anything must first be grasped from a certain situation in which it is becoming and translated into a particular. For example, each Buddha statue is singular, it is like no other and it is history like no other. It exceeds any intellectual and practical grasp, just as much as it enables a wide variety of further operations into which it enters and is entered. A Buddha statue is never just Buddhist, it is a heterogeneous assemblage that is singular in time and space. Evidently, in the realm of language, particularly scientific discourse, apriori specificities, that is singularity, are elided in the very first event of articulation qua translation. One is then becoming accustomed to seeing a thing as evidently and exclusively Buddhist, even though it is a history of its own that is enabled by and enables other connections. It is this that is singular, an own path of constant becomings that is unlike the paths of others.

But even if people doing science (itself of course a universal) uncritically would manage to overturn the naive and unconscious idealism that continues to dominantly structure scientific inquiry and its mode of existence, the universals created through colonial discourse would still continue doing their historical work, working on and in history. Indeed, without them science would become impossible – adhering to a strictly singularist analysis would dismantle analysis, for such an approach could not produce a ground for comparison. Therefore, as long as one wants to continue reproducing in one way or another science, it is central to distinguish within this practice the generalized and the universal, while consciously holding onto the active existence of the universal. And, as mentioned, the first step towards comparison is the translation of singularities into particularities.

Returning to the particular universal discussed here, the analogies have hopefully become clear. The emergence of Buddhism and Buddhist studies became possible from within and with Western modernity. For this to become possible, generalization is necessary. And, as Tsing writes, “generalization to the universal requires a large space of compatibility among disparate,

¹⁵⁷ K. Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*, trans. by S. Kohso, Cambridge – London: The MIT Press, 2003, p. 100.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 102.

particular facts and observations.”¹⁵⁹ The different intellectual, cultural, symbolic traditions that emerged through interaction between Buddhist thought-practice and all kinds of other ways of doing and thinking were often too different to be mutually comparable. “Buddha-Dharma first became Buddhism, and then Buddhism became a world religion.”¹⁶⁰ The creation of Buddhism entailed, among other operations, the necessity to decide what counts as Buddhism and what doesn't, that is the suppression of singularities in favor of particularity deduced from universality – or at least to act as if such separations were evident. But since such divisions do not make much sense within a Buddhist ontology, a lot of erasure has to go into the creation of Buddhism or any other non-Western ‘religion’.¹⁶¹ The goal of the practices which present as their reference the dhamma as taught by Buddha is ultimately to attain Nibbana, a cessation of kammic (reproductive) activities. There are two ways to achieve this: become a monk and concentrate all practice on attaining Nibbana in this life, or if one does not want to renounce this world, it is about co-producing kammic conditions that help others, including one's future self, to attain Nibbana (what all this means and what practices are correct/effective differs wildly).¹⁶² It is important to practice the correct practice, which is a question of knowledge (tradition) and work (individual practice). It is not an issue of in-group and out-group, as the use of a category such as Buddhism that creates Buddhists implies. Historical coherence is much more a question of local practice than of any set of clearly stated and interpreted rules, much less texts. Thus geographical unities are what formed the grounds for practices and traditions. Dialogues between disparate regions did appear, especially since what we call India played a significant role in the cosmological imagination. Monks like Xuanzang traveled to India through all kinds of lands, within which different types of Buddha-Dharma had been practiced, and narratives spun from their lives have become a natural part of many traditions. While such actualizations of Indian Buddha-dharmas, often accessed through sea routes, played a role in some areas, others were very fragmented locally, often as a result of geography and vegetation rather than along any ethnic lines.¹⁶³ The 'sticky materiality of practical encounters' was shaped as much by languages, as by shapes and correct views. What today appears certain is that it was not shaped top-down as a kind of “...ism”, but rather laterally, even rhizomatically. Buddha-Dharma is a history of continuous generalization (for it has translocal ambitions) and particularization (for the general tended to be reterritorialized within local contexts without a superstructure holding the tradition together, without the constant creation of one mutually intelligible discursive space).

Within the discourses of the Moderns, the rules of historical productivity differ from buddhist cosmologies. Once a generalization is instantiated, once a category rises above the particular, once a field of inquiry is formed starting from the premise of the universal, attempting

¹⁵⁹ Tsing, *Friction*, p. 89.

¹⁶⁰ P. Bishop, *Dreams of Power: Tibetan Buddhism and the Western Imagination*, London, Athlone Press, 1992, p. 91.

¹⁶¹ Cf. Turner & Salemin, p. 18 ff.

¹⁶² Klima, p. 272 ff.

¹⁶³ For example, Kamala Tiyavanich brings such fragmentation close to a Western reader, through narratives of lives of monks as late as the mid-20th century. (K. Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections – Wandering Monks in Twentieth-Century Thailand*, Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press, 1997.)

to validate a universal (here: Buddhism) within the particular, the latter will more often than not be oppressed, erased. Any particular that is deemed worthy of a universal will be used as evidence to support the universal (the existence of Buddhism). The veritable leap from historical particulars and generality to universality is erased and the process of articulation reversed. The chaos of history is approached apriori through the lens of the universal, which makes some things, some connections visible and others not so much. This is in and of itself not particularly problematic, after all, there is no sentient being that is not historically situated. It is the lack of awareness within most discourses that is problematic, the lack of awareness about one's own being conditioned that often leads to reproduction of the idealist construct 'Buddhism' with little "noticing"¹⁶⁴ of particularities. Scientific practice is, to a certain degree, an ongoing particularization of the universals that are at the basis of the fields science is divided into. The universal makes it possible to identify in/translate from the chaos of life the particulars that are then reinserted within the grander narratives of the apriori universal (be it religion, economy, politics, ..., or Buddhism). This dialectical movement (or rather movements, since there are many at the same time) does not leave the universal unchanged. Buddhism was something different 10 years ago than it is now. But recognizing such historicity is neither facile, nor could Buddhism continue to exist as a universal (within a given discourse).¹⁶⁵ Why is it so difficult to raise awareness of a universal's historicity?

Anna Tsing, in her landmark study on a very special fungus, the matsutake mushroom, and its world-making activities, describes how Americans literally cannot see the forest for the trees/mushrooms:

“[...] researchers imagine matsutake, American style, as a self-contained, scalable product, whose accounting requires no attention to relations with other species. The questions that follow about sustainability ask not about relational forests but about picker practices: Are pickers destroying their own resource? When researchers ask villagers about declines in matsutake harvests, they do not ask about forests. The question of decline is addressed as if mushrooms inhabited the landscape alone. This is the American question, [...].”¹⁶⁶

The forest is not seen as an active, multiple life-world. It appears literally as a different forest to American scientists than to Japanese ones. The latter tend to be “site-specific, that is, attuned to indeterminate encounters and thus non-scalable. U.S. forestry researchers are under pressure to develop analyses compatible with the scalable management of timber trees. This requires that matsutake studies scale up to timber. Site selection in Japanese research follows patches of fungal growth, not timber grids.”¹⁶⁷ Still, the forest is there, it is even active and it

¹⁶⁴ A. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015, p. 160.

¹⁶⁵ This is, of course, a hypothetical situation, since any discourse draws on others. One does not engage with Buddhist studies without coming into contact with the concept 'Buddhism'.

¹⁶⁶ Tsing, *Mushroom*, p. 223.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.* p. 221.

mediates (to a certain degree) between differing humans. This mediating activity however disappears from view in a cosmology that posits some things as external to humans and then considers these things to be passive objects. People then see a forest, talk about the forest with others, but do not recognize that it is not necessarily the same forest, even as it is the same forest. The mediating object is same, but different. It is similar, it is plural. Buddhism works the same way. The language concept and the objective objects mediate the very real differences between those using it.¹⁶⁸

Similarly in a Wat, different people (including fieldworkers like myself from differing backgrounds) will see and enact different worlds. But awareness, an ability that must be cultivated, can enable more varied noticing. Indeed, both awareness and its cultivation, are of central importance in the history that Buddha-Dharma makes. And with awareness comes change. While I did study *Buddhism* – and it was the study of *Buddhism* combined with anthropological interests that brought me to the Wat – the encounters at the Wat Dhammakittiwong changed me in very specific ways. The particulars had no idea about the universal. “Why are you interested in us? There is nothing interesting here. We are just people.” “Buddhism? [asked a Thai monk] There is a [Czech] place in the city if you are interested. We are Thai.” The mediating activity of the universal begins to evidence cracks when working in a context where it is unknown conceptually by those it ought to designate. The particular can, to a certain degree, be perceived as an instantiation of the universal that brought me into contact, but it was and always is more, it is singular.

“Convincing universals must be able to travel with at least some facility in the world, and this requires negotiations across incompatible differences. Upon occasion, these give rise to collaboratively agreed upon Natural objects. The unfamiliar becomes the familiar through this process, and generalization can occur.”¹⁶⁹ But does ‘Buddhism’ travel as freely, is it and can it be on the same level as ‘Nature’? “What is most striking to me about these two features [i.e. large space of compatibility among disparate particular facts, and contingent collaborations among disparate knowledge seekers] of generalization is the way they cover each other up. The specificity of collaborations is erased by pre-established unity; the apriori status of unity is denied by turning to its instantiation in collaborations. Buoyed by axioms of unity, collaborations create convincingly agreed upon observations and facts that then appear to support generalization directly, that is, without the prior mediation of the collaboration. The contingency of the collaboration, and its exclusions, no longer seem relevant because the facts come to ‘speak for themselves.’ The pre-evidential status of the axiom of unity fades into the background, too, when facts naturalized through collaboration can be called on as the natural basis of generalization.”¹⁷⁰ Here too, facts do come to speak for themselves, but only through the systematic transformation of people into facts that are robbed of voice. All those that had helped Western scientists to translate texts have been erased from the networks of sense-creation much like the very acts of

¹⁶⁸ This is what Anna Tsing calls *friction*, that what emerges “in zones of awkward engagement, where words mean something different across a divide even as people agree to speak.” (Tsing, *Friction*, p.xi.)

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

translation. Trans-lation as transposition as transformation.¹⁷¹ Translations are not identical. They are variations. Collaborations are abundant, because without them, there would be no field, but they remain unacknowledged. Buddhist studies are a result of past and present collaborations, and it is not as unified a field as the term wants to perform. And once the relatively stable concept ‘Buddhism’ came into being, it began mediating by itself the various meanings, histories and practices of those being studied and those doing the studying. It appears to exist by itself, but this existence goes unacknowledged, so that its activity remains hidden, even though they are central to practice. There is a further important cosmological context that helps create this situation.

The history of Buddhist studies is eerily similar to the one Tsing describes for botany. “Scholars of colonialism have pointed to the texts of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European botanists, gathering plants in non-European locales, as models for imperial consciousness. In contrast to the earlier period, European botanists wrote of the plants but not the people. Their texts emptied the landscapes they studied of human inhabitants, making them appropriate for European settlement and conquest [...]. In the process, they suppressed attention to the practices in which at least some of their knowledge was gained.”¹⁷² Emptying the landscape goes hand in hand with creating a landscape independent of sentient beings in the first place. “Once a landscape has been established, its origins are repressed from memory. It takes on the appearance of an ‘object’ which has been there, outside us, from the start. An ‘object,’ however, can only be constituted within a landscape. The same may be said of the ‘subject’ or self. The philosophical standpoint which distinguishes between subject and object came into existence within what I refer to as ‘landscape.’ Rather than existing prior to landscape, subject and object emerge from within it.”¹⁷³ It is not just sentient beings that appear as on the landscape, secondary to Nature even as they are nature, but cultural traditions too. Without the appearance of landscape, of nature as an ‘object’ that has been there without people from the start, it would not have been possible for Buddhism to emerge. While secondary to nature (because ‘cultural’), it too appears as an ‘object’ without people, without sentient beings, without entanglement in multispecies worlds. This is of course ironic, since Buddha-Dharma is based precisely on entanglement in multispecies worlds. And yet, it is not thought of as an object proper, because it seems to not be found out there, like material objects, even as that is precisely what is being done – both in scientific projects and common everyday practice.

Buddhism is both “cosmopolitan and situated.”¹⁷⁴ It is the status of Buddhism as a universal that enables the ‘scientific’ study of Buddhism, the spread of Buddhism in the ‘West’ and even tourism to the ‘East’, the imagining of superiority of Buddhism (universal) over non-

¹⁷¹ “The global spread of liberalism depends on translation. The terms through which liberalism is to be enacted must be made accessible in new locales. Liberalism is perfectly reproduced only if its language finds universal equivalents. In fact, translation carries cultural genealogies from an original language even as it takes on new genealogies of thought and action from the new language. Concepts are transformed in translation.” (Tsing, *Mushroom*, p. 224.)

¹⁷² Tsing, *Friction*, p. 94.

¹⁷³ K. Karatani, “The Discovery of Landscape,” in K. Karatani, *Origins of Japanese Literature*, trans. by B. de Bary, Durham – London: Duke University Press, 1993, pp. 11–44, p. 34.

¹⁷⁴ Tsing, *Friction*, p. 126.

Western traditions drawing on the teachings of the Buddha (particular) and it is Buddhism that brought me to do my research at the Wat Dhammakittiwong and write what I am writing and you are reading. And it is also the traditions drawing on what the Buddha taught, forming what the Buddha taught too, that created the possibility of my research. The Wat is enacted and managed by and for Thai people, for those that often learn about Buddhism only in interacting with Westerners. As a Wat and not as your typical Prague villa, it exists almost exclusively for Thai people.

There is little doubt that it was Buddhism and not any Buddha-Dharma that brought Bhikkhu Germanicus to Sri Lanka to become a monk. And it changed him. He is both – Western cosmopolitan (he thinks himself above historical traditions, because they are not Buddhist enough) and ethnic (‘supernatural’ beings and a sophisticated kammic cosmology have become him, have become part of his life, which he spends with ethnic communities). The lines of influence become entangled, the distinctions between original traditions and derived ones murky. In the messy particularities histories meet, interact, transform. The Wat “is a node of articulation of varied historical trajectories.”¹⁷⁵ Forming itself through combined trajectories of many (mostly) Thai people and their historical practices, it also forms them. It is both cause and effect. It is the place that binds further trajectories and transforms them. It even binds the trajectory of my particular understanding of Buddhism, thus perhaps someday finding its own way into more general academic discourse. Or perhaps not.

Why then call Buddhism a particular universal? As a conceptual product of the Moderns, it is a universal and if the selfsame Moderns engage with it in earnest ways, they particularize it by interacting with Buddha-Dharmas. Even as universal, despite all the erasure and suppression, the concept is drawn from ethnic histories – this is the reason why Buddhism is not and cannot be as universal as Nature (which is foundational for the cosmology of the Moderns). Yet because of its putative universality it enables connections and encounters with that which is outside of History, that is with particular histories of the Other. And these encounters are both a constant source of destabilization of and the source of the very possibility for Buddhism. Which of the two aspects is and will be dominant however is in the practice of all the beings living with Buddhism.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

VI. Epilogue, Or the Conclusion That Could Have Been a Prologue

Thus all social analysis is revealed as montage.

- Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System*

These last pages are, among many things, a narrative of becoming other. Of how the engagement of my past self with a mostly Thai community frequenting the Wat formed what that self has become today. This is relevant insofar as these encounters produced questions and issues that were from the point of view of my past self unexpected and led me to formulate methodological presuppositions anew. Or, more specifically, I knew I wanted to focus on the material-phenomenological dimension of whatever it would be I encountered. It turned out that whatever was much more different than I could've imagined based on my preliminary Buddhological education and specific research. The style of writing I employ is, as I think, a soft version of montage, which, “in its broadest sense, simply implies the joining together of different elements in a variety of combinations, repetitions, and overlaps.”¹⁷⁶ This way of writing is motivated, much like montage in film was, by a desire to show, to perform the constructedness of any reality. The dubiousness of organic unity. That is montage can “*make present by a certain absence* the invisible ground of the visible world.”¹⁷⁷ Make visible the constructive, productive activity of research, wherein complex phenomena are translated, based on sets of conventions into other discourses, and these necessarily partial representations are taken as non-partial. Thus reflexive methods of writing become necessary, especially when taking serious post-colonial criticisms of the power-relations that inhere in the whole academic/anthropological enterprise. These criticisms pertain to the hierarchy always reiterated in the distinction between ethnography and theory, the latter being 'universal' and Western, even though theory (or ideal constructions of this or that phenomenon) are of course also partial and situated.¹⁷⁸ Situatedness, meanwhile, is not a problem, indeed it is the very condition of existence, of worlding, of practice. Claims, representations and the like become problematic when partiality is presented as universality, when one's situatedness is elided.¹⁷⁹ Or, as Theodor Adorno put it many years ago:

“The notions of subjective and objective have been completely reversed. Objective means the non-controversial aspect of things, their unquestioned impression, the façade made up of classified data, that is, the subjective; and they call subjective

¹⁷⁶ R. Willerslev & C. Suhr, “Montage as an Amplifier of Invisibility”, in C. Suhr & R. Willerslev (eds.), *Transcultural Montage*, New York: Berghahn, 2013, pp. 1–16, p. 1.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁷⁸ A. Tsing, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 31.

¹⁷⁹ For a concise discussion within the realm of science, which also holds for anthropology, see D. Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”, in D. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, London – New York: Routledge, 1991, pp. 183–202.

anything which breaches that façade engages the specific experience of a matter, casts off all ready-made judgements [sic.] and substitutes relatedness to the object for the majority consensus of those who do not even look at it, let alone think about it – that is, the objective.”¹⁸⁰

I approached writing keeping these basic insights in mind. The first chapter charts a trajectory of stabilization. Even before I could engage any fieldwork in the Wat itself, I was faced with a surprising problem. Namely, how to find the place. Based on my efforts to localize, that is make actual a place I knew existed, but which kept giving me the slip, I articulated a text in which I describe a becoming present of a minoritarian physical space. That is a chapter about how a material/symbolic form that comes to make up a Wat is in a process of emergence and how such an entity, or any religious building in another cultural space, differs from one where it is typical. One of the differences lies in the ways that such concrete places impose their presence on random passersby. The Wat in Prague, now situated in an inconspicuous villa, was, as it turned out, not easily accessible. One could easily miss it, even when passing by. It is and is not present for anyone, that is it is present for those who seek to establish access, due to already having been initiated into its presence. Furthermore, as a place, as a building, it is a history. A history that forms current possibilities of practice and symbolic signification. What might seem clearly given, even if in surprising forms, must nevertheless persist in being in a material world that constantly changes. It is at this juncture that human practice (material and ideational) and non-human potentialities combine to emerge as forms for future practice. Such non-human potentialities do not necessarily disclose themselves, offer themselves to just anybody – be it as sources for symbolic articulations or a more basic apprehension per se. I articulated this emergence of things that after reaching a certain point can begin to influence even those who have no interest, on the background of metaphors of paths, strings and knots, which I took from contemporary anthropological theory and Buddhist traditions.

In the second chapter, I consider how external constraints such as weather, participating population and spatial constraints, form ritual practice at the Wat, that is how they contribute to the invention of new forms of ritual enactment. Such invention was particularly evident during the *Makha Bucha* and *Songkran* festival enactments in Prague. Still, amid these variations on practices learned in other material-symbolic realities, certain forms of bodily comportment are transposed and repeated. And it was through such repetition of actions during ritual events that I too, through my body, became encultured in, what were to me, unfamiliar practices.

The third chapter picks up where the first left off. Only now I reiterate the issue of presence in public space not in terms of accessibility to heterotopic spaces, but of Thai people and the performance of Thainess. This issue came up during the *Visakha Bucha* when a procession passing through the historical center was enacted. By focusing on the material-sensual dimension of the performance, it became clear that there are two very different experiences of the

¹⁸⁰ T. Adorno, *Minima Moralia – Reflections From a Damaged Life*, trans. by E. F. N. Jephcott, London: Verso, 2005, § 43.

procession. The front was articulated around universalist Buddhist messages and sangha symbolism. The rear meanwhile was a joyous, exuberant performance of Thainess.

Chapter four is about the daily liturgies performed at the Wat with the help of metaphors of connectivity. Connections were built in a very direct material sense through touching and in a more metaphorical sense by reaching out and integrating me into the liturgical performances. This shifted the focus of my research, of my presuppositions toward the bodily performative, that which precedes discursive meaning.

Lastly, chapter five is an attempt to (re)formulate the relationship between the signifier Buddhism, that has been shown in recent academic discourses and in my field-work as problematic, as a Western construct the referentiality of which is at best problematic. Despite these issues the term proves effective, in that it effectuates historical reality on a global qua universal as well as singular scale. In my case it was an entity that led me to do the research in the first place and formed not just my interests, but also my perception. Through these encounters engendered by Buddhism my own conceptualization of the term changed.

Michael Taussig, when describing the process, the work that went into him formulating a certain writing style based on philosophical insight, writes that it meant

“... breaking free of the rosary-bead claims of cause-and effect thinking in historical and social analysis, developing an entirely other mode not just of 'thinking' but of working, applied thought, embodied thought, if you like, which in my line of business eventually boils down to putting marks on paper, writing, and the occasional use of visual images like the photograph. The focus of worry shifted from the object of scrutiny to the mode of its presentation, for it is there, in the medium of presentation, that social theory and cultural practice rub one against and inform the other such that there is the chance, small as it might well be, of what I will call 'redeeming' the object – giving it another lease of life breaking through the shell of its conceptualizations so as to change life itself. There was no Theory outside of its being brought thus to life. Social analysis was no longer an analysis of the object of scrutiny, but of the mediation of that object in one context with its destination in quite another – for instance, Putumayan healers over there and back then, with you engaged with these stained-glass words here and now.”¹⁸¹

Or, for instance, Thai Theravāda practitioners in Prague and you, now. Writing then is no longer taken transparent representation, but the production of a specific mediality which comes to have a life and a reality of its own. Not that I would dare arrogate myself a level of sophistication as that of all those lustrous thinkers of all genders and backgrounds I cite. Nevertheless I hope that at the very least I have succeeded in demonstrating the validity of a materialist approach to studying phenomena.

¹⁸¹ M. Taussig, *The Nervous System*, London – New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 6.

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