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Emotional Healing Amidst Religious and Cultural Wayfinding:
A Case Study of the Atlanta Soto Zen Center

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By

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Bachelor of Arts
Lafayette College
2015

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
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Abstract

Emotional Healing Amidst Religious and Cultural Wayfinding:
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By Elizabeth Rae Miller

Due to the attribution of the lineage of non-heritage Buddhists in the United States to the Transcendentalists, Beat writers, and influential Japanese Zen teachers like D.T. Suzuki, Zen has developed into a uniquely individual practice. Because of the individual nature of American Zen meditation, media coverage has emphasized the physiological and psychological benefits of meditation, making it appealing to those seeking healing. Attempting to understand the attraction to Zen Buddhist meditation, this thesis analyzes the spiritual biographies, or "Wayfinder talks," of six practitioners at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center of Atlanta, Georgia, in the broader context of Zen Buddhism in the United States.

I argue that the six wayfinder talks reveal three key themes: (1) a rejection of the West and romanticization of the East; (2) abandonment of one's familial religion and "shopping around" in various religious traditions before settling on Soto Zen Buddhism; and (3) seeking and finding psycho-emotional healing through Zen meditation practice. To support these claims, I have drawn comparisons between findings at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center and individuals from *Old Wisdom in the New World: Americanization in Two Immigrant Theravada Buddhist Temples* by Paul Numrich, among other ethnographic and sociological studies.

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Sitting cross-legged facing the tan wall of the meditation hall at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center, I remembered the first time I ever meditated. I was about fourteen years old and completely infatuated by my older cousin's meditation practice. She'd ring a bell and sit in silence for ten minutes, something it would later take me months to achieve. Eventually I gave in to my own curiosity, cleared out a corner in my bedroom, leaned up against the wall, closed my eyes, and just sat. I lasted about three minutes and almost fell asleep, but sparked a deeper interest in meditation and Zen Buddhist culture that would continue until ten years later, when I found myself meditating at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center.

Despite meditating and having an interest in Zen culture over the past decade, I continued attending church, youth group, mission trips, and all the other typical Protestant youth activities, eventually working on the staff of a United Methodist summer camp. In high school, my youth group leader taught us how to meditate, something he had learned by attending a Buddhist meditation group hosted by our local Episcopal church. Even though I have maintained a Christian identity throughout my youth and early adulthood, I have continued to have an interest in Zen meditation, which inspired this project.

This project, which comprises a history of Zen in the United States, situation of the Atlanta Soto Zen Center in the broader Soto Zen community, six spiritual biographies and analyses and themes of the biographies, began as an attempt to understand better the blending of Christian and Buddhist identities in a group of Zen practitioners. In my own life, I always identified as a Christian, but also studied Zen Buddhism, contemplating *koans* and spending time in meditation. With the growth of meditation and mindfulness in

popular culture and some Christian churches even hosting Buddhist meditations, I hoped to find some individuals who identified both as Christian and Buddhist, much as I had. However, I quickly learned that blended identities did not exist among those I interacted with at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center (ASZC); each had fully committed themselves to a Soto Zen Buddhist lifestyle, whether that be through lay or ordained practice. In order not to impose my own expectations upon the community, I revised my question: now I asked how to analyze practicing Buddhists at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center as they told their own stories of entering Buddhist practice and the benefits they received from it, regardless of their religious background.

Methodology and Basic Terminology

For this project, I visited the Atlanta Soto Zen Center for the Sunday Soto Zen Service, which lasts about three hours, every week between September 2017 to December 2017. During those weekly services, I talked with frequent attendees of the services to learn more about their practice and spiritual histories. I also listened to a number of what the community refers to as "Wayfinder" talks, or spiritual biographies, while in attendance at ASZC. The talks are also recorded and available online. Four of the six Wayfinder talks come from a group *Dharma* talk[1] on October 22, 2017. During this talk, four practitioners and I shared our spiritual histories with one another in the form of a Wayfinder talk, a term which will be explored later in this paper. Another member shared

[1] *Dharma* refers to teachings of the Shakyamuni Buddha. At the Atlanta Soto Zen Center, each week's Sunday Soto Zen Service includes a one-hour "*Dharma* talk," which could be a group discussion of Zen teachings, Zen liturgy, or dialogue about the community, among other topics.

his own hour-long Wayfinder talk when he acted as the speaker for the week. Finally, the last practitioner shared his spiritual biography during an informal interview. From January 2018 to March 2018, I listened into the online stream of the weekly *Dharma* talk to continue gaining an understanding of the center's teachings. All *Dharma* talks are recorded and stored online on the center's website.[2]

Before trying to answer the question of how individuals found themselves doing Zen meditation, some terminology must be addressed to discuss Zen Buddhist communities in the United States. Such terms include, "American Buddhists," "Buddhism in America," "heritage Buddhists," "non-heritage Buddhists," and "Buddhist-inflected."[3]

Phrases like "American Buddhists" and "Buddhism in America" are fraught with issues and complexities. Like other religious traditions, one monolithic "Buddhism" does not exist. All three of the largest sects of Buddhism, Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana, can be found in the United States, with countless variations of each spread across the country. Owing to this, "Buddhism in America" as a topic could encompass everything from Buddhist-inflected mindfulness practices done in secular settings to a Cambodian Theravada monastery, where the residents practice strict monastic discipline. For the purposes of this project, I will provide a brief discussion of the introduction of Buddhism writ large to the United States, then focus on the development and unique

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[2] Dharma talk audio recordings can be found at: http://mixlr.com/atlanta-soto-zen-center-live/showreel/ .

[3] The terms "heritage Buddhists," "non-heritage Buddhists," and "Buddhist-inflected" come from my thesis adviser, Dr. Tara Nancy Doyle, who is a Buddhism scholar and Senior Lecturer in Emory University's Department of Religion.

attributes of American Zen Buddhism specifically, both of which happen in the second chapter, "Development of Zen in the United States."

The term "American Buddhists" can also create issues because of the ambiguous nature of both halves of the term. The United States is home to a rich mixture of people from all over the world, representing different cultures and ethnicities. Would that mean that anyone born in the United States who practices Buddhism would be considered an "American Buddhist?" What about immigrants who began practicing Buddhism after their arrival to the United States? Does the term apply to any type of Buddhism? Are Americans who practice Buddhism while living abroad in Japan or Thailand, for example, still "American Buddhists?" Is the "American" qualifier necessary, or are all these people simply Buddhists? Since these questions have not reached a community-wide answer, researchers must use different terminology to describe practicing Buddhists in the United States. This paper will use the terms "heritage" and "non-heritage" Buddhists to describe two different groups of modern practitioners.

Current practicing Buddhists in the United States can be divided into two amorphous categories: "heritage" and "non-heritage" Buddhists.[4] Heritage Buddhists have been raised in Buddhist households, educated in Buddhism, or have a generational connection to Buddhism or a similar ancestral connection to the religion. Immigrants who practiced Buddhism before coming to the United States would also be considered heritage Buddhists. Non-heritage Buddhists have converted to the religion and do not come from historically Buddhist lineages. While the lines between these two groups can sometimes be blurred (for example, the American-born child of heritage Buddhists), the

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[4] This language comes from my thesis adviser, Dr. Tara Nancy Doyle.

categories still prove useful in providing broad categories with which to discuss the history and current realities of Buddhism in America.

As Buddhist practice continues to develop in the United States, some programs and teachings have emerged that derive from Buddhism, but have since been somewhat secularized or separated from their Buddhist roots. For example, Emory University's Cognitively-Based Compassion Training (CBCT) is derived from Tibetan Buddhist practice, but has been framed as a secular meditation to cultivate compassion.[5] For the purposes of this paper, such programs will be referred to as "Buddhist-inflected practices,[6]" meaning they utilize or derive from Buddhist teachings, but have been secularized or are being used for non-religious purposes.

Based on ethnographic data from the Atlanta Soto Zen Center community and supporting studies of other Buddhist centers, I have discovered that such practitioners tend to reject Western culture to romanticize and accept Eastern culture, abandon their religious upbringing before exploring multiple religions and ultimately settling on Soto Zen Buddhism, and report both seeking and finding emotional healing through their meditation practice at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center.

Overview of Chapters

In the first chapter, "Development of Zen Buddhism in the United States" I situate the Atlanta Soto Zen Center within the rich history of Zen in the United States. The

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[5] "CBCT®," accessed April 1, 2018, https://tibet.emory.edu/cognitively-based-compassion-training/ .
[6] This language comes from my thesis adviser, Dr. Tara Nancy Doyle, who credits Emory University graduate student Marianne Florian for this term.

chapter specifically follows the development of Buddhism from the lineage of non-heritage Buddhists, many of whom attribute the start of their tradition to the Transcendentalist writers. From there, the World's Parliament of Religions (1893), Beat writers, and Japanese immigrant teachers like D.T. Suzuki shaped Zen. After the 1965 immigration reform bill, Zen exploded in the United States, entering mainstream vocabulary and conscience, only to be overtaken as a movement by mindfulness and Tibetan Buddhism in more recent years.

The second chapter, "Situating Soto Zen in Atlanta," sets the stage for the rest of the study, describing the Atlanta Soto Zen Center's physical space, demographics, and weekly meditation offerings. This section also includes a brief biography of the abbot of the center, Zenkai Taiun Michael Elliston, placing him within the broader context of Soto Zen Buddhism (both in Japan and the United States) and his distinctive *Dharma* transmission lineage[7], stemming from Soyu Matsuoka. This chapter comes from my firsthand observations at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center, an interview with Michael Elliston, and resources available on the center's webpage.

The third chapter, "Spiritual Pathways to the Atlanta Soto Zen Center," introduces the six participants in the case study, Dinesh, Ian, Mike, Yasodhara, Andrew, and Lin. I draw heavily on their "Wayfinder" talks wherein each told their spiritual history, discussing their childhood experiences with religion, and other experiences that have shaped their spiritual lives. The Wayfinder talks serve as the primary ethnographic data

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[7] Buddhist teachings, or *dharma*, are passed formally from teacher to student through dharma transmission. Such passage of teachings can be followed through lineages.

for the study in combination with observations made while I attended the Atlanta Soto Zen Center.

The fourth chapter, “Themes and Analyses,” discusses three themes that can be found within the six spiritual biographies. When laying out the first theme, “rejecting the West, romanticizing the East,” I claim that the six practitioners interviewed at ASZC have inherited a meditation-focused form of Zen Buddhism. I apply theories from Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and Donald S. Lopez’s *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*, to analyze the ethnographic data in this theme. While aspects of individuals’ practice and the center’s leadership try to fight the meditation-only focus of Zen in the United States, practitioners still tend to cite meditation as the part of Zen that has most affected their lives. The second theme, “abandonment of familial religion, ‘shopping around,’ and settling on Soto Zen,” claims that the six practitioners rejected the religion of their upbringing before practicing Soto Zen Buddhism. This chapter also includes the idea of spiritual “shopping around,” or experimenting in different religious traditions to find one’s ideal religion, which ended up being Soto Zen for these individuals. The third and final chapter, which focuses on the theme, “seeking and finding emotional healing,” claims that each of the six practitioners reported emotional healing as a motive for starting to practice Zen meditation and/or as a benefit of doing meditation. In this section I also argue that media representation of Zen emphasizes the emotional benefits of doing meditation, thus attracting those seeking emotional and psychological healing to enter Zen spaces. While this thesis will not generalize from this finding, many authors who have studied non-heritage Buddhists in the USA have found similar themes, including Jeff Wilson in his studies *Dixie Dharma: Inside a Buddhist*

Temple in the American South and *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture* and Paul Numrich in his study *Old Wisdom in the New World: Americanization in Two Immigrant Theravada Buddhist Temples*, among other smaller studies.

I. Development of Zen Buddhism in the United States

"My karma was to be born in America where nobody has any fun or believes in anything, especially freedom." –Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*

In this chapter, I provide a brief overview of the history and trends found during the development of Buddhism in America. Inasmuch as providing an expansive history and analysis is beyond the scope of this thesis, this chapter focuses primarily on the introduction of Buddhism to the United States, paying special consideration to the lineage of non-heritage Buddhists. I continue by introducing pivotal figures in the development of Buddhism in the United States, including the Transcendentalist writers, the Beat writers, and immigrant Japanese teachers. I focus mostly on Zen Buddhism, since the Atlanta Soto Zen Center comes from the Soto Zen tradition.

Non-heritage Buddhists often attribute the start of their religious tradition to the Transcendentalists and early Romantic thinkers and writers.[8] In his textbook overview of Buddhism in America, Richard Hughes Seager acknowledges the lack of conclusive historical verification of this ancestry, but argues the value of identifying with the

[8] Richard Hughes Seager, *Buddhism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).; Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1992).

Transcendentalists and Romantics comes from the creation of an "indigenous lineage" connected to American culture and history.[9] This lineage was first argued by Rick Fields, in his controversial history of Buddhism in America, *How the Swans Came to the Lake.* While Fields received criticism for focusing on "white Buddhism," I sought out this lineage due to the overwhelmingly white community at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center. Seager's work closely follows the earlier history detailed by Fields.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman, among others, shared a fascination with Asian religions, using newly translated copies of Hindu and Buddhist texts to influence their works.[10] However, their contribution to the development of American Buddhism comes further in the future; "they inspired another generation of American seekers about a century later . . . the poets and writers of the Beat generation."[11]

Between the Civil War-era writers and the Beat generation, Buddhist expressions in the United States continued to develop, albeit at a much slower pace than it would eventually grow. In the 1870s, Henry Steel Olcott and Helena Petrovna Blavatsky founded the Theosophical Society in New York City.[12] After founding the society, they traveled to Sri Lanka, where they took refuge in the Buddha, *dharma*, and *sangha*[13], thus becoming (probably) the first Americans to convert to Buddhism.[14]

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[9] Seager. 34; Fields. 54-69.
[10] Seager. 34
[11] Seager. 34
[12] Seager. 34; Fields. 83-118.
[13] To become a Buddhist, most traditions assert that one must recite the three refuges: I take refuge in Buddha, I take refuge in *dharma* (the teachings of Buddha), I take refuge in *sangha* (the Buddhist community, both locally and globally).
[14] Seager, *Buddhism in America*. 35

Two decades later, in 1893, the World's Parliament of Religions met in Chicago. The gathering, which was a component of the World's Fair, included religious leaders from around the world representing ten different traditions.[15] Asian religions, specifically Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, formally entered the American religious community at the Parliament.[16] Seager offers four reasons for the importance of the Parliament in the development of Buddhism in America. First, Asian Buddhists discussed the many Buddhist traditions, including Theravada, Zen, Nichiren, as well as others, exposing Americans to the complexities and diversity found within Buddhist tradition.[17] Second, the presenters displayed *dharma* as fully relevant in modernity, not a "mysterious form of mysticism, exotic and hoary with antiquity."[18] They also argued that Buddhism's nontheism and psychological focus could reconcile science and religion in a way that Christianity never could.[19] Developing scientific discoveries and explanations of the world challenged Christian believers' faith as new science could be seen as contradicting Christian teachings. Those presenting Buddhism felt it could easily coexist with modern science since the teachings supposedly did not oppose this "new science." Third, the Parliament may have inspired interreligious dialogue, a crucial feature of the emerging globalization and immigration occurring in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[20] Finally, the Parliament inspired Buddhist missionary movements in the United States.[21] Prominent Zen Buddhists such as Dharmapala, Shaku Soyen, Sokei-an, Nyogen Senzaki,

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[15] Seager. 35; Fields. 119-129.
[16] Seager. 36
[17] Seager. 36.
[18] Seager. 36-37
[19] Seager. 37
[20] Seager. 37
[21] Seager. 37

and D.T. Suzuki toured the United States, "effectively [laying] the foundations for American Zen Buddhism."[22]

Students and contemporaries of Rinzai Zen teacher Shaku Soyen began traveling to the United States in the early twentieth century. Sokei-an, a fellow student of Soyen's teacher, completed Zen training in Japan in 1929, receiving authorization to teach and moving to New York City to found the Buddhist Society of America, later named the First Zen Institute.[23] The First Zen Institute served primarily native-born Americans, making it one of the first of its kind.[24] Around the same time, Nyogen Senzaki traveled to the United States, instead settling on the West Coast. Upon arrival, he spent seventeen years studying and immersing himself in American culture, not teaching until 1922, when he started a small, informal group called "the floating *zendo*."[25] The group formed in San Francisco, then moved to Los Angeles, where Nyogen Senzaki taught both Asian and European Americans.[26] Sokei-an and Nyogen Senzaki exemplify the first wave of monastic-educated Asian immigrant teachers serving primarily American students. This dynamic has largely continued into modern Buddhist contexts, with American practitioners maintaining lay lifestyles, as opposed to forming robust monastic communities.[27] In Japan, meditation is primarily a monastic undertaking, so American Buddhists have created a hybrid practitioner who is neither fully a monastic nor fully a

[22] Seager. 37; Fields. 130-145.
[23] Seager. 38; Fields. 168-194.
[24] Seager. 38
[25] Seager. 38.
[26] Seager. 38.
[27] Seager. 38; Fields. 168-194.

layperson.[28] The question of American Buddhist monasticism continues, with no clear consensus about the status of lay practitioners.

In the 1920s, American-born Dwight Goddard lived and practiced in a Kyoto monastery adhering to a monastic lifestyle and wanting to bring that intensity back to the United States upon his return.[29] Based on his experiences, Goddard believed that a new American *dharma* could not develop from exclusively lay practice.[30] To try to form an American monastic community, Goddard founded the Followers of Buddha in 1934, which would include two monasteries, one in Vermont and one in California.[31] The monasteries never came to fruition; Goddard, nevertheless influenced American Buddhism through his publication of *The Buddhist Bible* in 1932.[32] This publication introduced Jack Kerouac to Buddhist teachings and indirectly sparked the "Zen boom" of the 1950s.[33]

The post-World War II era served as a time of rebuilding for Japanese Zen Buddhist monks. During the war, Zen institutions faced rampant destruction and secularization, many monks turning to family lives instead of monastic pursuits.[34] After the war, Japanese Zen monks had to provide pastoral care to their lay communities, which they viewed as either taking away from their meditative practices or as inspiration to encourage lay practice of meditation.[35] Owing to the destructive forces of World War

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[28] Seager. 38.
[29] Seager. 39; Fields. 168-194.
[30] Seager. 39.
[31] Seager. 39.
[32] Seager. 40.
[33] Seager. 40.
[34] Seager. 90.
[35] Seager.90.

II, the landscape of Japanese Zen Buddhism had irrevocably changed, making the United States seem like a fresh start to some leaders, insofar as it was free from the institutional history of Japan.[36]

Arguably one of the most formative eras in American Buddhist history, the 1950s saw the entrance of Buddhism into popular American culture. D.T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, and the Beat writers "thrust Buddhism into the American mainstream," particularly Zen.[37]

D.T. Suzuki taught Buddhism at Columbia University, where his lectures attracted both academic and bohemian attention. At the same time, popular publications like *Vogue* and *Time* magazine published articles about Suzuki's lectures, pushing Buddhist thought and teachings further into the American public consciousness.[38] Building on ideas from the World's Parliament of Religion, Suzuki helped create the connection between psychotherapy and Buddhism, a distinctly American innovation.[39]

Alan Watts studied Buddhism in England, New York, and California, becoming an influential author on "Buddhism, Christian mysticism, psychotherapy, and spirituality."[40] Watts wrote about three forms of Zen in his book, *Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen*, published in 1959. The first form, Beat Zen, did not impress Watts; to him the Beats' interest in Zen was merely as "self-indulgent dabblers."[41] Square Zen, or Japanese Zen practiced in the United States by Japanese immigrants and their respective monastic

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[36] Seager. 90.
[37] Seager. 40; Fields. 195-224.
[38] Seager. 40; Fields. 195-224.
[39] Seager. 40.
[40] Seager. 40.
[41] Seager. 41.

institutions, received harsh criticism as well.[42] For Watts, the "true spirit of Zen" consisted of "free-form, humanistic spirituality infused with creative potential."[43] According to Richard Hughes Seager, Watts' version of Buddhism fared well in the United States and quickly became popularized due to its individualistic qualities, upbeat outlook, and "emphasis on creative self-expression," all celebrated qualities in the early 1960s.[44] Around the same time, some Japanese Zen teachers arrived from Japan with critical attitudes toward the traditional institutions of Zen Buddhism.[45] These teachers, "once in the United States, typically encountered Americans seeking authentic spiritual experience but wary of- often in flight from- institutionalized religion."[46] Skeptical of their own religions, these Japanese Zen teachers found American students and began teaching in a fresh context, free of the institutional history of Japan.

Beat writers, such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder, used Buddhist teachings in their writing, thus introducing it to a broader community. The writers, however, added their own creative, American influences into the Buddhist teachings, Americanizing the *dharma* they spread.[47] Scholars consider the publication of Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* in 1958 the start of Beat Zen.[48] Beat writers and Beat Zen identified with the Transcendentalists, expressing "spiritual revolt with political overtones" in their writing.[49] This overt association between Buddhism and social

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[42] Seager. 41; Fields. 195-224.
[43] Seager. 41.
[44] Seager. 41.
[45] Seager. 91.
[46] Seager. 91.
[47] Seager. 41.
[48] Seager. 41.
[49] Seager. 42.

revolution led to the further association of Buddhism with a countercultural, anti-institutional tradition, especially with the influence of Gary Snyder.

Appearing in Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* as Japhy Ryder, Gary Snyder studied Zen more intensely and in more indigenous contexts than his fellow Beats. Snyder studied in a Japanese monastery for nearly a decade, providing him with content for his later writings, which linked "Buddhism to broadly American themes such as Native American myths, nature, and ecology."[50] Focusing more on sociopolitical realities of the *dharma* in the United States, in 1961, Snyder wrote "The mercy of the West has been social revolution; the mercy of the East has been the individual insight into the basic self/void. We need both."[51] His conceptions of the East and West could be understood as a symbiotic relationship between the "positive" aspects of each culture/worldview. Snyder's conception of Buddhism included classless societies, "gentle violence if it comes to a matter of restraining some impetuous redneck," smoking marijuana, engaging in a variety of sexual relationships, and other "worlds of behavior and custom long banned by the Judeo-Capitalist-Christian-Marxist West."[52] Snyder also observed a connection between Buddhism and psychedelic drug use. In a 1996 survey of 1,454 respondents, "over 40 percent said that their interest in Buddhism had been sparked by taking LSD or mescaline."[53] The usage of psychedelic drugs could be tied to seeking

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[50] Seager. 41.
[51] Seager. 41. This statement shows some essentializing of both Western and Eastern religious traditions and cultures, although Snyder does not explicitly reject Western social revolution. Instead, he calls for its interaction with his essentialized understanding of Eastern religious culture to create a more encompassing religious worldview.
[52] Seager. 43.
[53] Seager. 43. This aligns with the story of the Atlanta Soto Zen Center's abbot, Michael Elliston, who was introduced to Zen by a friend in Chicago after using LSD. His story will be detailed in the chapter on the Atlanta Soto Zen Center.

escape from an emotional concern, which will be considered later in this thesis in the context of meditation.

Due to the availability of information about Buddhism, "their [baby boomers] introduction to the *dharma* was largely through books, and they easily drew from them the conclusion that the pursuit of enlightenment could be highly individualized and personalized, filtered through humanistic psychology, augmented through the use of mind-altering substances, pursued without sustained discipline, and divorced from institutions."[54] This understanding of the pursuit of enlightenment continued to shape American iterations of Buddhism amongst countercultural influencers.

Beyond the influence of the American countercultural writers and thinkers, immigration further shaped Buddhism in the 1960s due to United States immigration policy reform. In 1965, Congress passed the Hart-Celler Act, easing restrictions on immigration from countries outside the Western Hemisphere.[55] Since the passage of the landmark immigration policy reform, approximately forty percent of all new immigrants to the United States have been from Asia, showing the continued influence of Asian religions, including Buddhism.[56]

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[54] Seager. 43.
[55] "The Hart-Celler Immigration Act of 1965," CIS.org, accessed March 20, 2018, https://cis.org/Report/HartCeller-Immigration-Act-1965. Before the passage of the Hart-Celler Act, United States immigration policy operated under a quota system. This act follows closely on the shirttails of the Civil Rights Act, Voting Rights Act, and creation of Medicare and Medicaid, other landmark sociocultural bills. The timing of the Vietnam War around the passage of the bill caused enormous Southeast Asian immigration into the United States, many of them bringing diverse Buddhist traditions with them.
[56] Sharon Lauricella, "The Ancient-Turned-New Concept of 'Spiritual Hygiene': An Investigation of Media Coverage of Meditation from 1979 to 2014," *Journal of Religion and Health* 55, no. 5 (October 2016): 1748–62, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-016-0262-3. 1757.

Since the 1960s, Zen Buddhism has exploded into an enormous cultural force, entering popular vocabulary and understanding. However, "zen" has expanded beyond the Buddhist tradition and has taken on a cultural significance of its own. A simple search of "zen" on Amazon brings up over 500,000 results, including but not limited to books, home décor products, mini rock gardens, nutritional supplements, aromatherapy, and soundtracks, showing the wide variety of "zen" expressions in modernity. Stemming from Robert Pirsig's 1974 philosophical novel, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, countless books have been published following the same title format: *Zen and the Art of Happiness*, *Zen and the Art of Knitting*, *Zen and the Art of Writing*, among many others. As explored later in this paper, D.T. Suzuki inspired a more cerebral understanding of Zen, untied from the institutional history of Japanese and Chinese Zen and Ch'an Buddhism, which can be seen throughout American popular culture and colloquial usage of the term "zen" as a state of mental clarity and peacefulness. Social scientist Sharon Lauricella notes a substantial increase of English print news articles about meditation in the early 2000s, with a marked dip in 2012,[57] showing both the sharp rise in discussion surrounding meditation and its eventual decline.

In more recent years, the mindfulness movement and Tibetan Buddhism have overshadowed Zen Buddhism. In the geographical area near Emory University, both the Shambhala Meditation Center of Atlanta and Drepung Loseling Monastery, a Tibetan Buddhist monastery, have attracted many practitioners. Since 1995, Drepung Loseling has been affiliated with Emory University, creating a unique partnership between a

[57] Lauricella. 1750-51.

monastery and Western research university.[58] However, the Emory University Buddhist Club offers weekly meditations led by Buddhist leaders in the Atlanta area, which includes Michael Elliston as a guest, keeping Soto Zen practice relevant in the student group.

Jeff Wilson, North American and East Asian religious studies scholar, discusses the decline of “countercultural Buddhism” in his 2014 work, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture*. Wilson claims that Buddhism initially appealed to countercultural individuals who “wanted something different from life in suburbia, office jobs, conventional marriage, and parenting.”[59] However, he contends that mindfulness offers something to those who have chosen to pursue marriage, parenthood, and conventional workplaces, while still claiming the same types of emotional benefits as Zen Buddhism: improving interpersonal relationships, and reducing stress.[60] As mindfulness has entered the mainstream as an alternative to Buddhism, countercultural Buddhism, as exemplified by the Beats and their followers, has become less popular, particularly among those who have chosen to have families and office careers.[61] The phenomenon Wilson describes can help understand fluctuations in membership at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center, while the rich history of the tradition in the United States, as discussed by Richard Seager and Rick Fields, informs the teaching and demographics at the ASZC due to the development of the non-heritage Buddhist lineage.

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[58] “Drepung Loseling Institute,” accessed March 23, 2018, http://www.drepung.org/Emory.cfm.
[59] Jeff Wilson, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). 124.
[60] Wilson. 125.
[61] Wilson. 131.

II. Situating Soto Zen in Atlanta

Soto Zen

Zen Buddhism generally falls into two distinct sects: Rinzai and Soto, which, for the purposes of this paper, differ primarily based on practice. Rinzai focuses on the practice of *koans*, which are phrases or riddles that do not adhere to logical reasoning meant for contemplation. Practitioners may meditate on a specific *koan* to find answers and eventually attain enlightenment. For example, an extremely popular *koan*, the *Mu Koan*, is a short conversation between a practitioner and his or her teacher. The monk asks, "does a dog have Buddha-nature[62]?" to which his teacher responds, "no [*Mu*]." Based on Buddhist teachings of reincarnation, the dog does have Buddha-nature because all sentient beings have Buddha-nature, so the student must meditate on why the teacher would say the dog does not have Buddha-nature. Reflecting on such teachings acts as a path to enlightenment and improved Zen practice.

Soto Zen, on the other hand, focuses on seated meditation, or *zazen*. During meditation, Soto practitioners should not have a goal, they should just sit. One way of doing Soto Zen meditation, typically only done by beginners, is "counting the breath," where the individual focuses on their breathing, counting each breath in and out.[63] Another way to meditate is using the "following the breath" technique, where the individual focuses on their breathing, but does not ascribe any words or numbers to the

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[62] In Mahayana teaching, every sentient being has a Buddha-nature, meaning any sentient being has the capability to reach enlightenment in this lifetime. The Buddha-nature can emerge once one's mind is cleansed of delusions, which, in the Soto Zen tradition, happens through meditation without goals. Realizing one's inner Buddha-nature leads to enlightenment in the Mahayana tradition.

[63] Kim Boykin, *Zen for Christians: A Beginner's Guide* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003). Kindle locations 155-173.

process, instead feeling the breath as it enters their nose, into their lungs, and out through their lips.[64] A third way to meditate, and the one students are being led towards, is called *Shikan-taza*, which translates to "just sitting," and "involves neither focusing on counting nor breathing."[65]

According to most Zen traditions, a wandering monk named Bodhidharma brought Zen (Ch'an[66]) Buddhism from India to China.[67] The name "Soto" comes from the ninth-century monk founders of the sect, Tozan and Sozan; the first two letters of each of their names form the term "Soto." The founder of Soto Zen in Japan, Dogen Zenji (1200-1253) spent time studying Buddhism in Japan before traveling to China to study with Ch'an teachers. In his teachings, Dogen emphasizes the importance of the everyday practice of Zen. For Dogen, Zen practice does not only happen during *zazen*, but expands into everything one does in a day: working, cooking, eating, cleaning, and even bathing. At Eihei-ji, the main Soto Zen monastery founded by Dogen in the Fukui Prefecture of Japan, daily Zen practice includes periods of *zazen*, but also cleaning the temples, preparing meals, and using the bathhouse.[68] This worldview and set of practices extends to the Atlanta Soto Zen Center, as the Sunday Soto Zen Service includes periods of *zazen*, but also involves cleaning the center and preparing tea and snacks.

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[64] Boykin. Kindle locations 852-864.
[65] Deane H. Shapiro and Steven M. Zifferblatt, "Zen Meditation and Behavior Self-Control: Similarities, Differences, and Clinical Applications," *American Psychologist* 31, no. 7 (July 1976): 519–32, https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.31.7.519. 524.
[66] The Chinese term for Zen Buddhism; Zen is the Japanese term.
[67] The information in this paragraph comes from Dharma talk teachings by Michael Elliston.
[68] *Soto Zen Buddhism, Daihonzan Eiheiji* (SOTOZEN-NET, 2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iqvtJIHKLyA.

Michael Elliston, Roshi[69]

Zenkai Taiun Michael Elliston is both the founder and current abbot of the Atlanta Soto Zen Center. Practitioners at ASZC refer to him as Elliston Roshi[70] or *sensei*.[71] Elliston Roshi hails from Centralia, Illinois.[72] After studying at the Institute of Design at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago for a Bachelor's and Master's degree, Elliston taught art and design in Chicago before moving to Atlanta in 1970 with an advertising research startup company. He continues to keep art as a central piece of his life by painting and building; the *zendo*, or meditation hall, of the Atlanta Soto Zen Center features multiple pieces of abstract, colorful watercolor wall art by Elliston, with muted colors mixing along both the canvas and the inside of the glass covers, as well as furniture he designed and built for meditation platforms and altars. He encourages a creative, artistic community, leading workshops and retreats on Zen and creativity with other artists in the community, including writers and musicians, much like a retreat Elliston and Andrew Dietz, a writer, led from April 27-28, 2018, called "Zenovation," combining Zen, creativity, and innovation. The center hosts a music night on alternating Friday nights, offering practitioners the opportunity to perform in a group setting. Elliston Roshi has also set Zen liturgy to music, enticing those present for the Dharma talk to sing

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[69] Unless otherwise noted, all information in this section comes from my interview with Michael Elliston on October 1, 2017, at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center.
[70] "In Soto Zen, roshi is a term of respect that you might use when addressing or speaking about a teacher, an abbot of a temple or a priest very senior to you." Michael Wenger, "What Is Roshi?," *Lion's Roar* (blog), December 1, 2002, https://www.lionsroar.com/dharma-dictionary-roshi/.
[71] *Sensei* is generally understood to mean teacher. At ASZC, the terms *sensei* and roshi may be used interchangeably by practitioners without disrespect to the teacher.
[72] "Abbot Bio," accessed March 26, 2018, http://www.storder.org/index.php/homepage/elliston-bio.

along, showing a different way of "performing" liturgy without simply reciting, which I witnessed on September 19, 2017, during a musical *Dharma* talk at ASZC.[73] Elliston Roshi's creative energy pervades and shapes the Atlanta Soto Zen Center community through his art and furniture filling the space and the creative retreat offerings at the center.

In an age of LSD, social critique, and the Vietnam War, Michael Elliston found himself as a college graduate in Chicago looking for meaning. He recalls discussing LSD with a jazz drummer friend of his brother who said he no longer did LSD, just Zen.[74] Following the drummer's suggestion, in 1966, Elliston met Soyu Matsuoka, or Matsuoka Roshi, a prominent immigrant Japanese Zen teacher and the founder of the Chicago Zen Buddhist Temple.[75] Matsuoka Roshi was born into a family of Zen priests, and, after receiving a Bachelor's degree, studied at Soji-ji Zen Monastery, one of the main Soto Zen training centers in Japan.[76] Matsuoka Roshi traveled to the United States on the orders of the Soto Zen Headquarters and taught at the Los Angeles Zen Buddhist Temple and the San Francisco Buddhist Temple (later, San Francisco Zen Center) before moving to New York to study at Columbia University under D.T. Suzuki.[77] After leaving Columbia,

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[73] Michael Elliston, *ASZC- Dharma Talk & Music* (Atlanta Soto Zen Center, 2017), http://mixlr.com/atlanta-soto-zen-center-live/showreel/?page=2.
[74] Michael Elliston, October 1, 2017; Sweeping Zen, "Taiun Michael Elliston Interview," *Sweeping Zen* (blog), accessed March 31, 2018, http://sweepingzen.com/taiun-michael-elliston-interview/.
[75] "Abbot Bio."
[76] Sojiji, located in the Kanagawa Prefecture of Japan, is one of two primary temples associated with Soto Zen Buddhism. The other is the Eiheiji temple, located in the Fukui Prefecture of Japan, created by the founder of Soto Zen in Japan, Dogen Zenji.
[77] "Matsuoka Bio," accessed March 26, 2018, http://www.storder.org/index.php/homepage/matsuoka-bio.

Matsuoka Roshi founded the Zen Buddhist Temple of Chicago.[78] Matsuoka Roshi devoted his life to teaching Soto Zen to Americans, which is how he met and came to teach Michael Elliston.

Elliston studied under Matsuoka Roshi from 1966 to 1970, during which time he underwent an initiation and discipleship ceremony[79] and was given the *dharma* name[80] Taiun, meaning "Great Cloud." Elliston was ordained as a Zen Priest on March 22, 1970, and soon after moved to Atlanta and began teaching. He founded the Atlanta Soto Zen Center in 1977, serving as the abbot since its creation. Matsuoka Roshi gave Elliston the title of "Roshi" in 1983. Matusoka Roshi and Elliston Roshi continued their teacher-student relationship until Matsuoka's death in 1997.

The Atlanta Soto Zen Center[81]

"By learning to put our entire being into our practice, we are able to realize our original nature and to carry that experience into daily life." –Atlanta Soto Zen Center[82]

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[78] "Matsuoka Bio."

[79] Initiation ceremonies (*Jukai*) require acceptance of the sixteen bodhisattva precepts and mark the commitment of lay practice in Soto Zen Buddhism. The discipleship ceremony is an informal ceremony before ordination as a Zen priest. Sweeping Zen, "Taiun Michael Elliston Interview," *Sweeping Zen* (blog), accessed March 26, 2018, http://sweepingzen.com/taiun-michael-elliston-interview/.

[80] Disciple initiates receive a "dharma name" to mark their entrance into Buddhist practice. The name (usually Japanese) is selected by the dharma teacher to suit the individual student. Gengo Akiba et al., eds., *Primer for Selecting Dharma Names* (San Francisco: San Francisco Zen Center, 2001), http://szba.org/wp-content/uploads/Primer_for_Selecting_Dharma_NamesCS.pdf.

[81] Unless otherwise noted, all information in this section comes from my interview with Michael Elliston on October 1, 2017.

[82] "ASZC Home," accessed April 30, 2017, http://www.aszc.org/.

The Atlanta Soto Zen Center, a community of lay Buddhist practitioners, is located between the North Druid Hills and Virginia Highlands neighborhoods of Atlanta, Georgia. The center sits at the end of Zonolite Place, neighboring Zonolite Park and a number of local businesses housed in warehouse-style facilities, including a gun range, a sporting goods shop, and an art studio. At its founding in the early 1970s, the center resided in the Candler Park neighborhood, in an antique store on the corner of McLendon and Oakdale; but the community moved to their current location around 2005-2006.

The center is also a member of a broader network of Soto Zen centers founded by Elliston, called the Silent Thunder Order. This Order connects centers sharing a lineage from Matsuoka Roshi. Affiliate organizations combine for retreats and *sesshins*[83], offering members the opportunity to meet one another and strengthen the network of Soto Zen practitioners in the United States and Canada. The name of the order comes from Matsuoka Roshi, who frequently employed the phrase *moku-rai*, which translates to "silence is thunder."

Since its founding, Abbot Zenkai Taiun Michael Elliston has led the ASZC 's spiritual life. Although he is formally the abbot of the community, Elliston emphasizes the horizontal nature of the center. Distinguishing it from Japanese Zen communities, which embrace a strict vertical hierarchy, he asserts that American centers, like the Atlanta Soto Zen Center, tend toward a "democratic" system. Elliston explained that religious communities in the United States must become legally recognized nonprofit organizations to claim tax exemption, so this creates a misleading sense of formality not present in communities of lay practitioners outside the United States. One such formality

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[83] Extended periods of *zazen* meditation.

includes a Board of Directors, which helps guide the community, satisfy the legal requirements of nonprofit organizations, and uphold the democratic emphasis of the center.[84] Indeed, Elliston and other members of the community refer to their organization as a "collaborative community." The reason given is that while there are a few formal leaders, all members of the community are encouraged to participate in decision-making processes and leadership. To emphasize the collaborative nature of the community, on the second Sunday of every month, Elliston Roshi dedicates the morning *Dharma* talk to the "social *sangha*," giving attendees the opportunity to share their visions and goals for the center, as well as their struggles, criticisms, and ideas for improvement. Those in attendance have most of the power since the community operates entirely through volunteers and donations. Elliston explains that in order to raise funds, the community must be able to offer an answer to the question, "what is the value in this?" By supporting members through the *sangha*, or community, the center seeks to offer members an encouraging place to practice sitting meditation with fellow practitioners, thus making it valuable to those who attend, and perhaps inspiring them to support the center through volunteering or monetary donations.

Following the concept of the horizontal hierarchy, Elliston discusses how newcomers have the highest “rank” in the community. Since they tend to be unfamiliar with the practices, newcomers receive more attention than frequent attenders because they require instruction and encouragement, thus putting them in a “position of authority,” since those further along their journey are obligated to help those newer than

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[84] “Center Administration,” accessed March 2, 2018, http://aszc.org/index.php/center-administration.

them learn. Using this type of system puts practitioners on more equal footing, offering more learned individuals to mentor those who are less experienced.

No official membership roster exists that would accurately reflect the forty to fifty practitioners that I was told sit regularly in ASZC's *zendo* by Elliston Roshi and senior resident, Ian. However, based on observation and word of mouth, I would say that the community consists primarily of white, American men. Women do regularly attend as well, but in much smaller numbers. Many newcomers that become involved in the community are not newcomers to Zen in general. Already being Zen practitioners, many have relocated to Atlanta and were simply searching for a new sangha. I was also told by Mike during a casual conversation at the center that Newcomers to Zen also visit-- roughly ten visitors per week-- but these newcomers primarily visit for school requirements at the high school or university level and therefore do not typically become long-term or active members of the community.

According to Michael Elliston during an interview, ASZC engages with the outside community primarily through speaking engagements and a prison outreach newsletter, which died out, but is being revived in the 2017-2018 season. In the fall/winter of 2017, the center is rebooting their prison outreach newsletter. In early November, the center printed, stuffed, and mailed over 500 letters about Zen to prisoners serving in metro Atlanta prisons and received about six hand-written responses while I was in attendance in early December. Elliston frequently speaks and hosts workshops in community and educational settings. Besides numerous off-site retreats at the Watershed Retreat Center in Hayesville, North Carolina, ASZC hosts meditation sessions at the center daily. As part of the Emory Buddhist Club's programming, Elliston visits the

Emory campus to lead meditation sessions sporadically throughout the academic year. To help foster interfaith engagement, Elliston has spoken at Baptist and Methodist churches to dispel some common myths about Buddhism and educate members of the churches. Thus, it is noteworthy that beyond the offerings within the center, which will be detailed below, ASZC expands efforts beyond their doors into the broader community.

The Atlanta Soto Zen Center's Facilities

A large sign sits along Zonolite road, proclaiming "MEDITATION" and welcoming visitors to the center.[85] ASZC resides in a three-part building. Two of the buildings look like small residential homes, while the third, and centermost building looks like a business with large, full-wall glass windows on either side of a glass door. This, however, is not the entrance; this space is the *zendo*, or meditation space. To enter the center, one must go to the right-most building, walk up a few stairs, and enter through that door. Once inside, there is a small foyer with a large armoire, a short glass table, a *dana*, or donation, box, and a shelf for practitioners to leave their shoes. Also in this section of the building is a library where visitors may borrow books about Buddhism, Zen, and other philosophy.

After leaving shoes on the shelf in the foyer, practitioners turn left down a narrow hallway connecting the foyer to the zendo and the other section of the building. The walls are covered with photos of current leaders of the Silent Thunder Order, including two from ASZC itself, Michael Elliston and Michael Goldman. About halfway down the

[85] All description of the Atlanta Soto Zen Center's facilities comes from first-hand observation during fieldwork.

hallway, the entrance to the zendo is wide open, allowing some light from the plate-glass windows into the dim hallway and ushering practitioners into the space.

The zendo itself is almost perfectly square in shape. Upon entering the room, one first sees the beautiful dark wood floors, reflecting light from the windows. Directly opposite the entrance to the *zendo* is a wall mostly covered with windows, obscured only by texturized panes for privacy and a lack of distraction during meditation. The walls are painted a dark tan, but are mostly covered in exceptionally large framed paintings created by Elliston Roshi, the smallest being about four feet tall and three feet across and the largest about six feet tall and five feet across. Each has a different color scheme, but compliments the others and brings color to the otherwise brown and tan room. The art could be considered abstract, showing blended watercolors appearing to melt down the canvas and the back of the glass covers. There is no clear subject in the paintings, and, depending on where one sits to meditate, they may be facing directly into the painting to meditate.

Making a pathway straight from the doorway to the opposite wall is a series of four light wood columns, separating the altar spaces from the rest of the *zendo*. In the closest space, a large black sitting cushion lays in the middle of the floor as a seat for the abbot, or whoever teaches during the *dharma* talk hour of the Sunday service. The altar lies just beyond the sitting space, consisting of three glass shelves, held together with light wood edges. The first shelf has three shelves, the top one holding a small figure of the Buddha, an oil candle, and an incense burner. Separated by about three feet, the second shelf has two glass shelves, the top one holding a small incense burner. Two large, gold-colored vases filled with gold-colored metallic lotus flowers and leaves flank

either side of the altar. Right behind this shelf sits the final, and tallest shelf, topping out at around four and a half feet high with a gold-colored, metallic Buddha perched atop. According to Elliston Roshi, the six shelves represent the six realms of rebirth found in Buddhist teaching,[86] adding a deeper laying of symbolism to the altar space.

The rest of the *zendo* is designed for sitting, both in the literal sense and the meditative practice sense. Each of the two sidewalls are lined with black fabric sitting platforms, each section with an individual black or dark blue *zabuton* and *zafu*, or sitting mat and cushion. The two sidewalls are nearly symmetrical, each with sitting platforms, cushions, and mats. Individual *zafus* and *zabutons* sit on the floor, creating additional sitting space for practitioners.

To the left of the altar, there is a sitting space designated for the leader of the meditation session. This space has a sitting cushion, a small shelf with bells, wooden blocks, and a digital clock. Two straight-backed chairs sit to the left of the platform, giving space to those who cannot sit on the platforms or the floor.

Finally, a separate sitting platform holds a computer and sound recording equipment to broadcast Sunday and Tuesday Dharma talks live over the internet.

The *zendo* is often quite dark, offering little natural light and often used without artificial lighting. Except during the *Dharma* talk portion of the Sunday Soto Zen Service, the space is silent and thus, at least for me, somewhat intimidating; others may find solace in the same setting. The décor is sparse and minimal, much like Japanese design, with Elliston's muted, abstract artwork adding to the calm feeling of the space.

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[86] In Buddhist teaching, one can be reborn into one of six possible realms of existence: human, animal, demi-god, god, hungry ghost, or hell-dweller.

One thing I noticed repeatedly in the *zendo*, was the floor: the dark wooden floors crack as you walk, loudly echoing around the room during walking meditation, adding lots of sound to the otherwise silent space. Due to its minimalism, the space can seem to take on whatever you are feeling as you enter it, whether that be calm, anxious, or otherwise.

The Atlanta Soto Zen Center's Offerings[87]

ASZC offers meditation sessions every day of the week, even including the occasional Saturday. Every weekday morning, visitors can sit from six to seven in the morning, starting their day with meditation. On Monday nights, the center hosts a meditation/book study. The ninety-minute session starts with twenty-five minutes of *zazen,* followed by a book discussion about an assigned reading from a book pertaining to Zen Buddhism. For example, the group is currently reading *Opening the Hand of Thought* (2004) by Kosho Uchiyama Roshi. Notably, none of the practitioners I encountered during the Sunday morning Soto Zen Services attended the book discussion, nor did I get the opportunity to attend. Tuesday nights the center hosts a "*Dharma* Skype" session which begins with twenty-five minutes of *zazen* followed by a *Dharma* discussion with Elliston Roshi that is broadcast via a live video feed to other affiliate centers of the Silent Thunder Order.

[87] Unless otherwise noted, information in this section comes from personal observation at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center, including posted event flyers, a weekly schedule posted on the front door, announcements during the Sunday Soto Zen Service Dharma Talk, and casual discussion between myself and practitioners.

The Wednesday night session is designed specifically for newcomers. Unlike the other sessions, it does not begin with twenty-five minutes of *zazen*, but introduces guests to the center, provides them with more information about the weekly sitting opportunities offered by the center, and gives them the opportunity to ask any questions they may have in a small group setting. Since this session is geared toward those who are new to Zen meditation, after showing guests physically how to sit and explaining the concept of "monkey mind[88]" and "letting go" of thoughts, the session's leader, which rotates between members of the community, has guests try meditating for as long as they can without beginning to fidget and lose focus entirely. This usually lasts about ten to fifteen minutes, according to Mike, a leader at the center. When I attended on September 6, 2017, Mike led the session and we, as a group, lasted sixteen minutes in an initial meditation attempt. At that session, seven undergraduate students came as a requirement for a religion course, while six, including myself, attended for the orientation to the center.

Finally, every Sunday morning from nine until noon, the center has a Soto Zen Service, which lasts for three hours and includes three twenty-five minute sessions of *zazen* separated by five-minute sessions of *kinhin*, or walking meditation. Following general announcements and chanting, participants join the "work party" and spend fifteen to thirty minutes cleaning the center, including the *zendo*, library, and restrooms, as Japanese Soto Zen founder Dogen taught and implemented in his monastery. Once the work party finishes, practitioners re-enter the *zendo* for a Dharma talk, which varies from

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[88] ASZC practitioners use "monkey mind" to describe thoughts that arise and try to consume the mind during meditation.

week to week from group discussions about Zen thought, a presentation by Elliston Roshi or another leader, a community forum for bettering the center, or a practice in Zen liturgy. Zen liturgy can take many forms, including a non-traditional form of putting Dogen's sayings into musical form on guitar and singing words that are most commonly chanted. About every third Sunday, services also include *dokusan*, where practitioners can discuss their practices with Elliston Roshi in a one-on-one meeting during the final twenty-five-minute sitting session of the day. I met with Elliston Roshi twice for *dokusan*, asking advice on how to avoid visual distraction during meditation. He offered the advice to focus the eyes on an imaginary spot beyond the wall, putting everything in my immediate vision into a blur. This advice helped me meditate longer without distraction. I attended every Sunday Soto Zen Service from September through the beginning of December of 2017.

Beyond weekly sitting sessions, the center holds retreats, which are generally four or five days long and held off-site in North Carolina, and *sesshins*, one or two-day events hosted at the ASZC *zendo*, a distinction in terminology the center employs itself. In October 2017, ASZC hosted an off-site retreat at the Watershed Retreat Center in Hayesville, North Carolina. This focused on "Zen and Creativity," offering practitioners the chance to do zazen for extended periods of time, but also practice writing, painting, drawing, and other artistic ventures during breaks and specifically-led Dharma sessions. These types of creative retreats are relatively unique to the Atlanta Soto Zen Center due to the artistic interests of Elliston Roshi as well as other writers, artists, and musicians in the community. Other past retreats have focused on the evolution of Buddha's teachings, as well as a Sewing Retreat for those who have entered the formal path to ordination in

the Soto Zen tradition. During *Dharma* discussions, Elliston Roshi, Mike, Andrew, and Ian mentioned sewing their "bibs" during Sewing Retreats. In December 2017, ASZC hosted the *Rohatsu sesshin* for a full week of intensive *zazen* training in their Atlanta *zendo*. *Zazen* sessions ranged from twenty-five to fifty-minutes each. Each afternoon, Elliston Roshi led a "*Dharma* dialog" for one hour, giving participants the opportunity to reflect on their practice and learn more about the Dharma and Zen Buddhism in general. One must observe silence throughout the entire *sesshin* unless specifically stated otherwise; they must also avoid reading. The schedule and rules for the *Rohatsu sesshin*, as well as previous experiences at the *sesshin* were discussed by practitioners during the "work parties" and *Dharma* talks at the center.

ASZC also celebrates official Soto Zen Buddhist ceremonies, including a Founders ritual in November and an *Ohigan* ceremony, held near the fall equinox each year. During the Founders ceremony, participants recite the names of each member of ASZC's lineage of Soto Zen, including the venerated Matsuoka Roshi, and down to some physically present in the *zendo*, including the abbot, Elliston Roshi. The annual *Ohigan* ceremony serves as a time for practitioners to remember and express their gratitude toward their ancestors. During the ceremony, each participant gives an incense offering to each of the ancestors they would like to honor.

III. Spiritual Pathways to the Atlanta Soto Zen Center

At the Atlanta Soto Zen Center, the first time a practitioner formally speaks during a *Dharma* talk[89], they give a "Wayfinder talk." The Wayfinder talk allows the

[89] As previously mentioned, during ASZC's Sunday morning Soto Zen Service, the last hour of the service is the *Dharma* talk. The *Dharma* talk could look like anything from a

speaker to discuss how they started practicing Zen Buddhism, how they found ASZC specifically, and why they continue practicing Zen despite the struggles of sitting meditation. The use of the term "wayfinder" in this community comes from Michael Elliston Roshi. However, the term appears elsewhere as well, including at Cambridge Buddhist Centre in England, meaning the stage of navigating suffering to find the *Dharma.*[90] Typically, one who is pursuing ordination in the Soto Zen tradition gives the Wayfinder talk. However, one Sunday, the *Dharma* talk involved everyone present telling their spiritual journey, despite not pursuing ordination. Incidentally, only one of the Wayfinder talks used in this study came from an "official" Wayfinder talk given by the head student of the day; all the other stories came from informal discussions of Wayfinding and individual interviews. Each student pursuing ordination would only give one Wayfinder talk, making it a rare occasion in a community like ASZC, where many have already given their talk.

In what follows, I will examine the Wayfinder talks of six individuals who practice at the center: Dinesh, Ian, Lin, Yasodhara, Mike, and Andrew.[91] Despite all being spiritual biographies, the talks happened in varying contexts. During a Sunday morning *Dharma* talk group discussion led by Ian, Lin, Yasodhara, Mike, and Ian all shared their Wayfinder stories in turns. Ian created this space for Wayfinding discussion after discussing my thesis project with me the week prior. Dinesh shared his spiritual

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group discussion on the state of the Zen center to Zen liturgy set to music to a Wayfinder talk to a formal Zen ritual ceremony.

[90] "Wayfinding," The Buddhist Centre, February 24, 2016, accessed April 25, 2018, https://thebuddhistcentre.com/cambridge/wayfaring.

[91] Michael Goldman and Andrew Dietz are considered public figures at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center, so with their permission their real names have been used. The other participants have been given pseudonyms for their privacy.

biography in a one-on-one interview. Andrew gave a formal Wayfinder talk as a forty-minute Sunday morning *Dharma* talk. As a participant-observer, I shared my own Wayfinder talk during the Sunday morning *Dharma* talk group discussion.

Dinesh

Dinesh is an Indian American man in his mid-twenties.[92] He studies as a graduate student at Emory University. Growing up, Dinesh attended a Hindu organization in San Diego, California, where his father served in the leadership. Owing to his father's devout Hindu practice, Dinesh spent most of his childhood and youth practicing Hinduism. At the Hindu organization, his father teaches a weekly class that Dinesh described as a "Sunday school of sorts." It was at these classes that Dinesh began to sense his disconnect with Hinduism, saying to me: "the words didn't really mesh, you know?" However, he still had to attend because his father taught the class. Dinesh's biggest issues with Hinduism were the concepts of *atman* and *Brahman*, which he explained as the soul, and a "cosmic energy" that serves as "the foundation for all the impermanent things in the world, so like our thoughts and physical objects and things like that." He continued, "I personally never agreed with that. That there was a permanent underpinning towards us and the world. I always felt that was, sort of, very . . . self-delusional for me. That's how I've always felt about the idea of the soul in general."

When Dinesh moved to college, he started to identify as an atheist and avoided organized religion altogether. "I didn't really think much about religion during that period." During college, Dinesh began to experience some "emotional problems" and

[92] Dinesh, November 5, 2017. All information about and quotes from Dinesh in this spiritual biography are from this interview.

was diagnosed with depression. Reflecting, he says, "I was able to graduate, and I was able to make it okay, but I still sort of felt this dissatisfaction within me . . . I was just like, well, life just sucks." After coming to graduate school at Emory, Dinesh's depression worsened, and around the New Year of 2017, he committed to meditating every day. To do so, he attended weekly classes run by Emory University's Cognitively-Based Compassion Training program[93], but did not find much satisfaction because he does not consider himself good at visualization, an important aspect of CBCT meditation. After the class ended, Dinesh wanted to continue meditating with a community, so he did a Google search and found the Atlanta Soto Zen Center, which is just around the corner from Emory's main campus.

Since beginning meditation, Dinesh's depression has improved, although he mostly considers his success in terms of improvements in the quality of his meditation. He considers a good meditation session one in which he recognizes the thoughts passing through his mind and just accepts them for what they are and moves on. He attributes his mindset to a Zen master whose name he does not know: "consider these sort of thoughts like secretions, like sweat." Dinesh finds solace in knowing that "this journey has no end and I'm never going to reach it, and that's okay. And in a way, that's the most fulfilling part of being . . . a part of the Zen community."

Ian

[93] Cognitively-Based Compassion Training is a Buddhist-inflected program that combines Tibetan Buddhist meditation techniques and visualization techniques. More information can be found on CBCT's website: https://tibet.emory.edu/cognitively-based-compassion-training/.

Ian is a white Midwestern American man in his forties.[94] At the time of his Wayfinder *Dharma* talk, he served as the senior resident at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center, meaning he lived in the center, devoted himself to Zen practice through an intensive residency, and adhered to the center's meditation schedule as closely as possible. He is no longer in residence at the center, but lived there for almost a year. Ian grew up in an Irish Catholic enclave in Michigan, attending Catholic schools and never missing weekly mass. Personally, Ian took religion very seriously, as evidenced by an emotional recollection of his experience doing the Stations of the Cross at his church:

> We had an old-school church, like marble. There's like twelve stations. It's the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and you kneel down on this hard marble and you're supposed to, like, imagine you're one of the people in the Passion play basically. Like piercing the side. I was like, five. And I'd be there balling my eyes out, like, SO HARD, like 'I DON'T WANNA KILL HIM!' Ya know, it was, like, so, um, traumatic. I mean, it opens your heart up in the sense that you're just like- but I was- I was too young. Like, way too young.

As I will explore later, Ian's intensity of Catholic practice eventually translated to an equally intense disassociation from Catholicism. After discussing his traumatic childhood encounters with church, Ian discussed his home life. While living an outwardly privileged life (big brick house, belonging to a private club, vacationing at a private beach), Ian's father struggled with alcoholism and "was a narcissist and 'rage-oholic,' too." His father's issues led the family into "some really bizarre stuff," including a total lack of food in the house. As a teen, Ian struggled with intense anxiety and rage, and thus became a "raging atheist." In response, Ian wanted to burn down the Catholic church and "take all their art and sell it and give it to the poor."

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[94] Michael Goldman et al., *Wayfinder Dharma Talk* (Atlanta Soto Zen Center, 2017), http://mixlr.com/atlanta-soto-zen-center-live/showreel/. All information about and quotes from Ian in this wayfinder talk come from this Dharma talk.

After finishing college, Ian traveled to Thailand to teach English. Ian remembers his first encounter with Buddhism: "Buddhism seemed like a very, like, happy, simple, kind of in a way, religion there." While in Thailand, Ian spent time with an abbot of a Theravada Buddhist temple, from whom he learned that some things are just "natural, every day, not great, not horrible, like just kinda okay, but okay is good enough." This teaching followed him back to the United States when he returned to recover from a malarial infection and back to Nepal, where he studied with Tibetan Buddhist traditional doctors in the Himalayas. In retrospect, Ian thinks he liked Tibetan Buddhism so much because it "almost seemed like hyper-Catholicism" because there were saints, the saints were sinners before they were saints, the presence of *tantra*, and deities. After another three years, Ian returned to the United States, where he stopped studying Buddhism because those around him felt it made him "crazier" than he "already was."

Around the winter of 2016, Ian felt led back to practicing Buddhism. By searching the internet, he found a group that practices "Buddhism without meditation," but after reading a book of the same title, Ian realized he needed to meditate. "So I went online and I was like, these Zen people. They meditate. That's, like, what they do. So I was like, I just need to learn to meditate for like, ten minutes. That was my goal. So I kind of backed into Zen." After months of meditating, Ian began to see improvements in himself, including "seeing my mind calm down [and] get clearer." Others noticed as well, telling him that they could tell he was "present, not in some la la land" when chatting with them.

Mike

Mike is also a white American man in his forties.[95] He serves as a leader in the ASZC community, often leading Newcomer sessions and giving *Dharma* talks on Sunday mornings. He was raised Jewish and attributes his introduction to Zen to the Beat writers, saying they each got involved in Buddhism at some point in their lives. During college, Mike read about Zen practice and Dharma teachings, but could not find a place to practice. After college, he started studying the martial arts and participated in Judo tournaments. Typically, the tournaments would open with a Protestant Christian prayer. However, Michael Elliston opened one tournament with a gong, requiring all the martial artists to sit in silence. Mike said all his readings of Alan Watts and D.T. Suzuki came flooding back. Mike was drawn in by not being asked to believe anything, but instead to just do something. At the tournament, he sought out Elliston Roshi to receive information about the Atlanta Soto Zen Center and has been attending ever since.

At the time he began practicing, Mike had been recently divorced and had a "life consumed by anger." Acknowledging the physical effects of anger, Mike realized he could not stay healthy while being led by this rage. After studying with Elliston Roshi, Mike feels that sitting meditation is "really, really healthy." He still gets angry, but it does not function as the driving force of his life.

Yasodhara

Yasodhara is a Native American woman in her early thirties.[96] She lives in China with her husband, but temporarily moved to Atlanta to give birth to her second son with the assistance of her in-laws. From a young age, Yasodhara encountered rampant

[95] Goldman et al. Information about and quotes by Mike come from this *Dharma* talk.
[96] Goldman et al.

alcoholism and drug abuse in her family, including her own father. Her entire family was also “very, very Catholic.” Yasodhara always felt they were clinging to something [Catholicism] to feel safe after doing a bad thing. Since her youth, Yasodhara has been committed not to “be like that.” Describing her religious upbringing, she explains, “I never really believed in the Bible or anything, even though I had to go to Catholic school and CCD[97] and all that. It just never really- it never struck me as anything other than maybe some nice blessings and something for people to hold onto.”

Yasodhara’s husband studied Buddhism and introduced her to the book, *Old Path White Clouds* by the Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. She found “so much in there that made sense to me . . . [the book] wasn’t telling me ‘you’re safe’ or ‘I’m gonna hold your hand’ or anything like that.” Yasodhara and her husband moved to Thailand, where she had her first encounter with Buddhist monks and nuns. Spending time in the Theravada temples helped develop her own meditation practice, and she realized she needed to practice on her own and while at home. Also while in Thailand, she began reading works by Bodhidharma. Soon after, her and her husband moved to China, where they could visit the Shaolin Temple and Bodhidharma’s cave, both important sites to Zen Buddhism. While in China, Yasodhara reflects, “I just knew. That’s what I wanted to do. This is the path that was going to work for me.” Since then, she has focused her efforts in Zen, even naming her sons Bodhidharma and Dogen, after prominent Zen teachers.

Andrew

[97] Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD), sometimes referred to as Catechism, is a program of Catholic religious education for children.

Andrew is a white New Englander in his fifties.[98] He has practiced at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center for over a decade and currently serves on the organization's board. Andrew owns and operates his own marketing firm and is a published writer. Because of his reliance on words in his everyday life, Andrew's wayfinder talk revolved around words and their impact on his life. Andrew enjoyed words from an early age, primarily through reading, writing, and comedy, including Abbot and Costello, the Marx Brothers, and Woody Allen. However, Andrew states, "when you're a wise ass, you can get yourself in trouble," reflecting on his tendency to talk himself both into and out of problematic situations like offending an elementary school bully. While acting in a high school play, Andrew read the book *Zen in the Art of Archery* by Eugen Herrigel (1948) at the urging of his director. Despite being somewhat attuned to Zen through popular culture, this book served as Andrew's first real look into Zen.

After college and a few years of working in New York City, Andrew moved to Atlanta, where he met his wife. While in Atlanta, he had to sell a business he had built, putting him into a state of depression. He saw a counselor, who recommended he read *A Path with Heart* by insight meditation teacher, Jack Kornfield (1993). This book brought him back into Buddhism, although not specifically Zen.

Later, Andrew "pushed away from the words of religion and religion. [He couldn't] sit in temple and read words [he] really couldn't relate to, [which] gave [him] no comfort, that [he] really didn't believe jived with reality or with fact or with science or with anything like that." He briefly accepted an atheist worldview, but it felt like a

[98] Andrew Dietz, *When Words Fail* (Atlanta Soto Zen Center, 2017). All information about and quotes by Andrew in this wayfinder talk come from his Dharma talk.

rejection, which was not enough for him. After coming across another book, *Start Where You Are* by an American nun in the Tibetan tradition, Pema Chodron, Andrew decided to visit groups in the Atlanta area to meditate in a community. He tried the Atlanta Shambhala Center, ZenSpace, and, eventually, found a home at ASZC. He remembers "not looking for religion, not looking for all the trappings." Before entering the *zendo* on his first day at the center, Andrew recognized two people he knew and felt he had to at least give it a try. Now Andrew continues to practice at ASZC and co-leads retreats about Zen and creativity, which he has named "Zenovation."

Lin

Lin is a white Southern American man in his forties.[99] He was first introduced to Zen in 1998 while spending time in Kyoto, Japan. While visiting temples in the city, Lin recalls, "something really really kicked in . . . yeah, this is it. This is for me." At first, Lin mostly read about Zen and Buddhist teachings and noticed his readings were repetitious; something, which stood out to him, making him think, "*This* is the truth." Lin discussed how he dealt with a lot of anger in his life. Since starting to study with Sensei Michael Elliston, Lin has learned a lot about his anger. By not letting himself stew over issues, instead releasing the anger using the "letting go" methods he has learned through Zen meditation, he has brought some relief to himself and those around him. However, he does not read as much now, saying "at some point you have to stop reading and start doing."

[99] Goldman et al., *Wayfinder Dharma Talk*. All information about and quotes by Lin come from this wayfinder talk.

Lin came to the Atlanta Soto Zen Center in the early 2000s after attending the JapanFest at Stone Mountain, Georgia. Leaders from ASZC had a booth at the festival, where Lin met Elliston Roshi and first learned about the center. He has been attending since and serves on the Board of Directors of the center.

IV. Themes and Analyses

"These Zen people. They meditate." -Ian

In this section, I will discuss three themes that emerged time and again when listening to the Wayfinder talks and spiritual biographies of the six practitioners at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center: 1) rejecting the West, romanticizing the East; 2) abandoning familial religion, "shopping around," and settling on Soto Zen; and 3) seeking and finding emotional healing. Using other ethnographic data, including that of Paul Numrich and Jeff Wilson, among others, and theoretical frameworks, like that of James H. Austin's *Zen and the Brain*, I situate the stated experiences of Ian, Dinesh, Lin, Yasodhara, Mike, and Andrew within broader studies of Zen Buddhism and Buddhism in the United States.

1. Rejecting the West, Romanticizing the East

Early American encounters with Zen and Buddhism occurred mostly through texts, where, according to American Buddhist scholar David McMahan, "they saw in textual Buddhism an experimental attitude, a de-emphasis on faith and belief, and a

sophisticated philosophy- exquisitely rational, yet soaring beyond ordinary reason."[100] Because of this, McMahan contends that Zen appealed to iconoclastic poets, artists, and "refugees from Christianity and Judaism who felt stifled by the strictures of those faiths," and fled from the demanding nature of their own religions.[101] He continues by noting,

> Zen's enthusiastic reception [was] among those [individuals who were] disenchanted with what they saw as the failed promises of Western culture. Such disenchantment entailed a rather idealized vision of Zen, as well as other Asian spiritual paths- an inverse image of the perceived spiritual cul-de-sac of the West.[102]

In this way, a small but influential group of Westerners began to essentialize and reject Western culture and Judeo-Christian tradition, while simultaneously essentializing and romanticizing Zen.

Donald Lopez, Buddhist and Tibetan Studies scholar, examines the mystification and intellectual colonization of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism in Chapter Six of his work, *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (2012). Lopez contends that Tibetans have participated in their label of "peripheral,[103]" or fundamentally separate/different from their surrounding community and the rest of the world. I argue that, like some Tibetans, some Zen Buddhists, including Matsuoka Roshi and D.T. Suzuki, have participated in the Americanization of their tradition. As Zen entered the United States and Western popular culture, influencers like D.T. Suzuki refocused the tradition, moving away from strict hierarchical practices and emphasizing a more cerebral

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[100] David L. McMahan, "Repackaging Zen for the West," in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann (University of California Press, 2002), 218–29. 219.
[101] McMahan. 218.
[102] McMahan. 222.
[103] Donald S. Lopez, "The Field," in *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 156-180.

definition of "Zen." This new Zen came "to denote a kind of free-floating state of being, both relaxed and disciplined, engaged yet detached . . . a free-floating state of being, rather than as a concrete, historical tradition shaped by years of reflection and practice."[104] Despite pervasive word recognition in the West, "the use of the term *Zen* to designate a state of mind completely disassociated from the long and complex historical tradition of Chan and Zen in Asia is a unique development of the modern West and the missionary-minded Japanese."[105] McMahan notes that "notions of freedom and individualism so deeply rooted in modern Western philosophical and political discourse" further contributed to shaping Zen in the United States.[106]

Because of Zen influencers in the 1950s and 1960s, current American practitioners have inherited a meditation-focused, psychologized form of Zen Buddhism. The Atlanta Soto Zen Center remains true to many Japanese Soto Zen traditions, including chanting of *bodhisattva* vows and the Great Heart of Wisdom *Sutra*, extended periods of seated meditation broken up by *kinhin*, or walking meditation, and cleaning the Zen center as part of regular practice, as prescribed by Dogen and practiced at Eihei-ji, the Soto Zen monastery he founded. However, American Zen centers, like ASZC, fill a substantially different function for non-heritage practitioners than they do for their heritage Buddhist counterparts, both here and in Japan. In East Asia, intense meditation is done almost exclusively by monastics during their initial training, with very few laypeople taking it up.[107] However, in the United States, laypeople tend to be drawn to

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[104] McMahan. 219.
[105] McMahan. 218.
[106] McMahan. 221.
[107] McMahan. 222.

Zen for the almost exclusive purpose of meditation.[108] Exacerbating this difference, David L. McMahan and others, including regular practitioners in the United States, distinguish between Zen *temples* and Zen *centers* in the West. Zen temples tend to offer a cultural center for Japanese immigrants, primarily performing death and ancestor rituals.[109] Zen centers, however, “offer meditation training, programs, and *sesshins*. In North America, these centers make up a small percentage of Zen institutions, and the overwhelming majority of those who take advantage of their services are non-Asian Americans.”[110] Recognized as a Zen *center*, rather than a Zen temple, the Atlanta Soto Zen Center focuses its efforts toward meditation, while still performing a handful of Buddhist rituals throughout the year.

The trend of rejection of the West and romanticization of the East ultimately rests on the assumption of distinct categories of “East” and “West,” which were observed by postcolonial scholar, Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978). As Americans, we have inherited a worldview which distinguishes between the East and the West, stemming from the colonization of countries, peoples, and cultures outside of Western Europe. Creating a monolithic entity of the “East” or “West” can lead to categorical acceptance or rejection of a wide variety of otherwise unrelated cultural practices. For example, Ian disliked his experiences in the Catholic Church, but collapsed those experiences into the experience of American culture in general, including individualism, privilege, materialism, narcissism, and anger, leading him to a rejection of Western culture and relocation to Eastern Asia for a time. While in Thailand, Ian described his impression of

[108] McMahan. 223.
[109] McMahan. 223.
[110] McMahan. 223.

Buddhism as a "happy[111]" religion, showing, what I argue is, an Orientalized view of religion as an unchanging entity. Orientalism does not allow for nuanced understandings of complex cultures and belief systems due to the belief of fundamental otherness and lack of sophistication of non-European thought.[112] Challenging the Orientalist framework, Lopez emphasizes the non-reality of the Western idealistic view of the East; while Tibet acts as the Shangri-La for the West[113], I have found that for some of the practitioners at ASZC, Zen meditation acts as a personal utopia for contentedness and emotional stability.

Orientalizing a culture often leads to the ascription of static qualities, allowing for phrases, such as "the wisdom of the East."[114] Such positive attributions create a romanticized form of Zen, which may or may not exist in reality. The Wayfinder talks of some practitioners at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center reveal the ways in which Americans have been taught to think about what McMahan has referred to as an essentialized, romantic Western form of Zen. I will give a few revealing examples below.

When Ian first came to Zen Buddhism, it was for the meditation. After trying "Buddhism without meditation," Ian's reading made him feel committed to meditating; "having this book made me realize that I need to meditate."[115] Before, Ian considered meditation a psychological crutch, but after realizing its value, Ian searched the internet for a place to practice: "So I went online and I was like, these Zen people. They meditate.

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[111] Goldman et al., *Wayfinder Dharma Talk*.
[112] Said. 206.
[113] Lopez. Shangri-La is a fictional East Asian utopia, first referenced in James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* (1933).
[114] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 208.
[115] Goldman et al., *Wayfinder Dharma Talk*.

That's what they do. So I was like, I just need to learn to meditate for ten minutes. That was my goal. So I kind of backed into Zen."[116] Similarly, Dinesh started meditating with Cognitively-Based Compassion Training (CBCT), and sought out a space in which to continue his communal meditation practice after the course ended.[117] While Dinesh has found community in the Zen center, he primarily discusses meditation when asked about the Zen center and his experiences there.[118] He measures his successes based on improvements in the quality of his meditation, noticing when he can let go of thoughts versus they become consuming.[119] Like Dinesh and Ian, Mike became interested in Zen through a brief introduction to meditation at a Judo tournament, previous readings of Beat writers and D.T. Suzuki further ignited his interest.[120] His start in Zen Buddhism began through experiencing and wanting to continue doing meditation. Finally, Andrew reported "not looking for religion, not looking for all the trappings," when he began seeking out meditation communities.[121] This statement implies Andrew's lack of initial interest in traditional, hierarchical, ritual-focused Japanese Soto Zen Buddhism; he also began attending due to an interest in meditation. It can be seen from these short overviews that four prominent men at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center began practicing Zen for the meditation, while Yasodhara initially became involved through texts. While their motivations may have evolved through their practice and continued experiences at the

[116] Goldman et al.
[117] Dinesh, interview.
[118] Dinesh, interview.
[119] Dinesh, interview.
[120] Goldman et al., *Wayfinder Dharma Talk*.
[121] Dietz, *When Words Fail*.

center, they were initially drawn to the Soto Zen tradition through the practice of meditation.

This meditation-centered form of Zen Buddhism both stems from and allows for a similar essentialization of Western culture and religion, which can then be rejected wholesale. While the next section examines the rejection of familial religion in more detail, I will briefly look at the "essentialization" process here. While the influence of Judeo-Christian traditions on American culture cannot be denied, for many of the ASZC practitioners, Judeo-Christian traditions have been completely collapsed into American popular culture. Because of this, five of the practitioners encountered Buddhism in East Asian contexts. Yasodhara, Lin, Ian, and Mike all encountered Zen Buddhism through experiences either physically or culturally outside the United States. Yasodhara traveled to East Asia, including Thailand, and China; Lin traveled to Japan; and Ian traveled to Thailand and Nepal. Mike encountered Zen meditation through a Judo (Japanese martial art) tournament. Upon Ian's first encounter with Buddhism, he thought of it as a "happy, simple . . . religion there [Thailand]" showing his attraction to the religion due to its lack of qualities he saw in Catholicism and American culture.[122] Because of their experiences with Zen, and other forms of Buddhism in an East Asian context, they seem to resist the essentialization of Buddhism in the West, which could explain some of their attraction to the Atlanta Soto Zen Center.

Despite inheriting an essentialized, meditation-focused Zen Buddhism from their predecessors, leaders and practitioners at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center also seem to be fighting against further essentialization through adherence to many traditional Japanese

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[122] Goldman et al., *Wayfinder Dharma Talk*.

Soto Zen practices. The *zendo* itself uses Japanese-style furniture and artwork, despite the pieces of artwork and furniture being designed by Michael Elliston Roshi. The organization also takes seriously their dharma transmission lineage through Soyu Matsuoka Roshi and other legitimate Soto Zen teachers. A practitioner reported entering the Soto Zen tradition through texts rather than meditation practice. Although Lin finds benefits from meditation, he became attracted to Zen Buddhism through reading Buddhist teachings and noticing repetitions, making him realize, "*This* is the truth."[123] Beyond the physical space and one practitioner coming for teachings rather than meditation practice, ASZC adheres to the Soto Zen ritual calendar, including but not limited to the Buddha's birthday, ancestor veneration, and Founder's month. While the Atlanta Soto Zen Center and its practitioners generally exist within the essentialized Westernized form of Zen Buddhism found in the United States, the center still pushes against its own heritage and seeks out more traditional Japanese ways of practice.

Making the "essential" form of Zen be focused primarily on meditation has given rise to a trend of using meditation for medicinal and/or secular purposes, since it has been/can be separated from the tradition of Zen Buddhism. As I explore in a later section, practitioners at ASZC have used Zen meditation as a way of handling emotional or psychological concerns in their lives. The essentializing of American Zen to a meditation-focused, psychologized practice, started by D.T. Suzuki and his contemporaries in the 1950s and 1960s, has led to an increased focus on Zen as influencing the mind and focused almost exclusively on meditation, thus separating it from the rich tradition of Japanese Zen Buddhism and creating an Oriental vision of Zen.

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[123] Goldman et al.

2. Abandoning Familial Religion, “Shopping Around,” and Settling on Soto Zen

I found that all six of the wayfinder talks reveal a trend of rejecting one’s familial religion in search of a more fulfilling alternative. Before finding and settling on Soto Zen, many of the practitioners reported “shopping around” to try out different religious options. For some, the rejection of their family’s religion extended to a rejection of institutionalized religion in general, or even a denial of the existence of any spiritual reality. Related to the trend of “shopping around” and religious experimentation, leaders at ASZC frequently discuss the non-exclusive nature of Zen Buddhism; one supposedly does not have to believe anything specific to practice Zen. For example, as I was told repeatedly by Elliston Roshi during my visits to the center, one could profess belief in Christianity, but still be welcome to practice in the Zen community. However, only those who identify as Buddhist seem to practice regularly at ASZC, a unique attribute of the center based on ethnographic studies of Buddhist centers by Jeff Wilson and Paul Numrich.[124] Since the community at ASZC seems to attract individuals who want to practice Soto Zen Buddhism exclusively, the prevalence of rejection of familial religion may be much higher than it would be in other communities. In what follows, I will draw on ethnographic data to show how practitioners at ASZC have followed a similar path of leaving their family’s religion, “shopping around” in a variety of religious traditions, and finally settling on Soto Zen Buddhism.

[124] Jeff Wilson, *Dixie Dharma: Inside a Buddhist Temple in the American South*, New edition edition (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Paul David Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World: Americanization in Two Immigrant Theravada Buddhist Temples*, 1st edition (Knoxville: Univ Tennessee Press, 1999).

Ian and Yasodhara come from a Catholic background, Mike and Andrew come from a Jewish background, Lin comes from a Protestant background, and Dinesh comes from a Hindu background. Despite being a case study of only six individuals, the group fits a broader trend noted by Sociologist and practicing Buddhist James Coleman that states that people coming from a Catholic or Jewish background tend to be more attracted to Buddhism than their Protestant or non-religious counterparts.[125] Anecdotally, it seems possible that the presence of so many practitioners with self-reported Jewish backgrounds at ASZC could be due to its physical location near the Toco Hills neighborhood of Atlanta, which has a large representation of Jewish families.

Lin moves beyond his personal religious affiliations and considers his own religious upbringing and rejection of Christianity when making parenting decisions. He stated that he "will not indoctrinate his kids," the way his mother forced Methodist Christianity upon him in a way that emphasized guilt.[126] Reflecting upon his own knowledge of Christianity and Buddhism, Lin believes Christ taught Buddhism, but will allow his children to make their own decisions about religion, thus ending the cycle of familial religious rejection in his family.[127] While he did not elaborate further on the thought, I would surmise that Lin believes that Jesus Christ's teachings closely aligned with the Buddha's teachings.

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[125] James William Coleman, "The New Buddhism: Some Empirical Findings," in *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship* (Great Britain: Curzon Press, 1999), 91–99.
[126] Goldman et al., *Wayfinder Dharma Talk*.
[127] Goldman et al.

Ian fiercely rejected his Catholic upbringing, expressing a desire to burn down the Catholic Church and "take all their art and sell it to give to the poor."[128] In addition to rejecting the Catholic Church as an institution, Ian rejected the figure of God and spent some time in his youth as a "raging atheist."[129] Since then, he has adopted a more Buddhist worldview through his experiences with Theravada, Tibetan, and Zen Buddhism, but continues to have an antagonistic relationship with Irish Catholicism.

Owing, in part, to his father's strict adherence to Hinduism and prominent role in the Hindu community, Dinesh took the opportunity to rid himself of all religion once he moved out for college. Dinesh reported his primary issue with Hinduism was its concepts of *Brahman* and *atman*, which he sees as problematic due to the permanent nature of the concepts, which underpin the workings of the world. Due to his alienation from his familial religion, Dinesh concluded, "there probably wasn't a god. There couldn't possibly be a god. It's just people, ya know, making stuff up."[130] After rejecting god and religion altogether, Dinesh found a home in Buddhist practice because it did not accept the ideas of permanence he found in Hinduism.

Yasodhara was not passionately opposed to Catholicism, but never believed the teachings.[131] In her experience, her family used faith as a crutch for alcoholism and drug abuse, offering an easy solution to their wrongdoings by believing they were forgiven by God through Christ. She felt her family held onto the idea of religion as an identity marker rather than an actual belief or practice. While never truly associating with her

[128] Goldman et al.
[129] Goldman et al.
[130] Goldman et al.
[131] Goldman et al.

family's faith, Yasodhara does not have any relationship with the Catholic Church currently and fully embraces Buddhist teachings and practices.

On the other hand, Andrew, although never connecting with Jewish teachings, did not culturally disassociate with Judaism to practice Zen. Similarly, Mike was raised Jewish and no longer practices Judaism, but did not seem to have a notable or dramatic split from his familial tradition either.

In their flight from their family's religion, many reported "shopping around," or exploring more than one other religious tradition before settling at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center. This trend is not unique to ASZC, or even with American Zen Buddhism, however. In a study on American members of Soka Gakkai International, researchers found that 30 percent of their respondents shopped around before coming to the group.[132] The same theme emerged in a study on Theravada Buddhist temples in the United States.[133] Before coming to practice Zen Buddhism, Ian tried practicing Theravada Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, and "Buddhism without Meditation," a group based on a book of the same name.[134] Dinesh started meditating through a secular, but Buddhist-inflected practice of Cognitively-Based Compassion Training.[135] Yasodhara landed in Zen Buddhism through different Buddhist traditions she encountered while living in East Asia.[136] Andrew practiced at the Atlanta Shambhala Center and ZenSpace, a break-off

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[132] Phillip Hammond and David Machacek, "Supply and Demand: The Appeal of Buddhism in America," in *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship* (Great Britain: Curzon Press, 1999), 100–114.
[133] Numrich, *Old Wisdom In New World*.
[134] Goldman et al., *Wayfinder Dharma Talk*.
[135] Dinesh, interview, 5 November 2017.
[136] Goldman et al., *Wayfinder Dharma Talk*.

group from ASZC before eventually ending up at ASZC for the past decade.[137] Although not the same as shopping around for a religious tradition, Mike came to Zen Buddhism through practicing the Japanese martial arts, namely Judo, much like Ray Jansen of Numrich's study.[138]

In his study of immigrant Theravada Buddhist temples conducted in the early 1990s, Paul Numrich encountered many of the same trends and individual behaviors found in this study. For example, William Bartels read about Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Mormonism, and Jehovah's Witnesses before exploring the three largest sects of Buddhism, Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana.[139] Like Ian, Lin, and Yasodhara, Bartels' exploration of Buddhism mostly took place on trips to East Asia.[140] Bartels took his Buddhist identity very seriously and spent time studying each sect before settling on Theravada Buddhism, also like Ian, who found Zen the most effective in managing his life after not finding the same satisfaction in other Buddhist sects, and Andrew who explored Shambhala and a different Zen center before ending up at ASZC. Similarly, Ray Jansen affiliated with several Japanese Buddhist groups before coming to his Theravada temple, coming to the opposite conclusion of those at the Zen center about the sect of choice.[141] A couple, Nepal Aaron and John Knox, went on a two-month "church shopping spree" before starting to practice at the Wat Dhammaram temple.[142] Aaron was raised Baptist and Roman Catholic, but dropped church altogether in the time before the

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[137] Dietz, *When Words Fail*.
[138] Numrich, *Old Wisdom In New World*. 111.
[139] Numrich. 110.
[140] Numrich. 110.
[141] Numrich. 111.
[142] Numrich. 112.

"shopping spree," much like Ian and Dinesh, who both abandoned religion before beginning Zen practice. Reflecting on his practice, Knox commented, "it's miraculous that I'm a part of anything remotely close to organized religion today" because of a conservative religious upbringing that turned him off to religion entirely.[143] Similarly, Dinesh and Ian both had strict religious homes and were forced to practice their family's religion, thus turning them off to organized religion in general. Robert Ryan was raised Christian, but teachings "like the notion of God as Sovereign King and Judge did not sit well with him."[144] Andrew, Dinesh, and Yasodhara all reported the same reaction to their respective religions, not feeling a connection to their childhood religious teachings. Non-heritage Buddhists practicing at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center, Wat Dhammaram, and Dharma Vijaya experienced similar feelings of not connecting with their familial religions and exploring multiple religions before practicing Buddhism.

Based on the six wayfinder talks used in this study, I found that the practitioners at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center have separated themselves from the religious tradition in which they were raised. Additionally, many of them "shopped around" to explore a variety of religious traditions, both inside and outside Buddhism, before committing themselves to Soto Zen practice. These themes exist beyond just the Atlanta Soto Zen Center, as evidenced by Paul Numrich's *Old Wisdom in the New World: Americanization in Two Immigrant Theravada Buddhist Temples* study and Phillip Hammond and David Machacek's study on Soka Gakkai International.

[143] Numrich. 112.
[144] Numrich. 113.

3. Seeking and Finding Emotional Healing

Religion and healing has become a hot topic in American culture. In the academy, sociological as well as clinical studies have emerged, looking at the efficacy of religious practices in combatting ailments, both physiological and psychological.[145] Beyond academia, articles and news channels feature the intersection of faith and health, exposing the general public to developing ideas of health and healing.[146] In 1976, psychologist Deane Shapiro identified a paradigm shift in conceptions of health. Shapiro's new healthy person is thought of as "an individual who can pilot his or her own existential fate in the here-and-now environment, and who can have far greater self-regulatory control over his or her own body than heretofore imagined."[147] To achieve such an improvement, Shapiro reports attempts to "develop and improve techniques by which people can self-observe their behavior, change it (if desired), and then continually modify and monitor it according to their needs."[148] Since then, practices like meditation, yoga, prayer, and faith healing have entered the public mind as ways of handling disease and discomfort, as well as improving discipline and self-control. Specifically, in the past four or five decades, meditation has firmly planted itself into popular culture, primarily as a spiritual or secular

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[145] Siroj Sorajjakool, *When Sickness Heals: The Place of Religious Belief in Healthcare* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Pr, 2006); *I Am the Lord Who Heals You: Reflections on Healing, Wholeness, and Restoration* (Nashville: Abingdon Pr, 2004); James L Griffith, *Religion That Heals, Religion That Harms: A Guide for Clinical Practice* (New York: Guilford Pr, 2010); Patty de Llosa, "Getting Out of the Way: How a Doctor Learned to Heal," *Parabola* 41, no. 3 (2016): 68–75.
[146] Bruce Y Lee and Andrew B Newberg, "Religion and Health: A Review and Critical Analysis," *Zygon* 40, no. 2 (June 2005): 443–68; Lauricella, "The Ancient-Turned-New Concept of 'Spiritual Hygiene.'" 456.
[147] Shapiro and Zifferblatt, "Zen Meditation and Behavior Self-Control." 519.
[148] Shapiro and Zifferblatt. 519.

practice offering physical and psychological health benefits.[149] In their review of religion and health clinical studies, Lee and Newberg find that, although the current (2005) evidence is not definitive,

> …meditation may have a number of health benefits, helping people achieve a state of restful alertness with improved reaction time, creativity, and comprehension, decreasing anxiety, depression, irritability, and moodiness, and improving learning ability, memory, self-actualization, feelings of vitality and rejuvenation, and emotional stability.[150]

Members at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center reported some of these same benefits when discussing their reasons for beginning and continuing Zen practice with me. Using data from ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, I will show how practitioners at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center have sought out and reported finding emotional healing in their meditation practice.

Ian, Dinesh, Mike, and Andrew all cited emotional struggles as their reasons for initially coming to Zen practice. Each also, while adding the caveat that they still sometimes struggle, expressed satisfaction with how Zen practice at ASZC has helped them manage their particular emotional concern. Yasodhara and Lin, while not attributing the start of their meditation practice to psychological concerns, both reported greater self-control of emotions due to their Zen practice.

Mike gave the Dharma talk on my first visit to the center in September, 2017. During his talk, he focused primarily on a book by James H. Austin called *Zen and the Brain*, which discusses the effects Zen meditation has on the physical makeup of the human brain. He discussed the vagus nerve, which connects the brain, face, throat, and

[149] Lauricella, "The Ancient-Turned-New Concept of 'Spiritual Hygiene.'" 1752.
[150] Lee and Newberg, "Religion and Health." 456.

abdomen.[151] From the study about the vagus nerve, he focused on the control that Zen practitioners can have over guttural reactions, like anger or anxiety, that others may lack; "Zen students can block it, which allows us to react . . . well, respond rather than react," he said.[152] The language of "respond rather than react" emerges frequently when discussing the benefits of meditation at ASZC. Outside ASZC, one of Paul Numrich's respondents reports finding himself able to "react spontaneously without conscious thought" while practicing the martial arts, a context he and Mike share.[153] According to James Austin, who Mike cited in his talk, gaining more control over the vagus nerve through Zen practice can help calm the flight or fight reaction and allow practitioners to react with less errant emotion.[154] Mike shared how he struggled from anger issues his entire life, but found some relief since he began practicing Zen meditation over a decade ago.[155]

Similarly, colleagues and friends have noticed a difference in Ian's behavior, noting his mental presence in conversations where he was once in "a la la land."[156] He finds himself more able to respond to situations rather than react, or at least be conscious of when either is happening. To illustrate his progress, Ian discussed an encounter with a police officer in the Virginia Highlands neighborhood of Atlanta.[157]

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[151] "Vagus Nerve | Anatomy," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed March 24, 2018, https://www.britannica.com/science/vagus-nerve.
[152] Michael Goldman, *Dharma Talk (3 September 2017)* (Atlanta Soto Zen Center, 2017), http://mixlr.com/atlanta-soto-zen-center-live/showreel/.
[153] Numrich, *Old Wisdom In New World*.
[154] James H. Austin, *Zen and the Brain: Toward an Understanding of Meditation and Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998).
[155] Goldman et al., *Wayfinder Dharma Talk*.
[156] Goldman et al.
[157] Goldman et al. This story, including quotes, come from this Dharma talk.

While driving through the neighborhood, he noticed two vehicles tailgating him. He thought, “Am I gonna be a good Buddhist about this, or be an Irish Catholic? . . . I’m going full Irish Catholic tonight.” He pulled over to wave the tailgating vehicles by, but only one passed, the other staying behind him and continuing to tailgate. Finally, he stopped in the middle of the road to confront the tailgating driver. The man behind him jumped out of the car and he thought, “alright, let’s do this.” Quickly, he realized that the man was actually a police officer. “And he’s not a suburban cop. He’s like *fully* ready to throw down.” The officer ended up letting Ian go, but not before discussing the dangers of road rage, as instances of shooting deaths resulting from road rage has been increasing in recent years.[158] From the story, Ian gathers, “pragmatically, I can see it’s not always that dramatic [being confronted by a police officer], but you always have a choice. This way or that way. You can even feel anger, just not act on it.”

Ian finds solace thinking about the “okay is good enough” attitude he learned while studying with a Theravada Buddhist teacher in Thailand. Just acknowledging “today wasn’t great, but I didn’t get into a screaming match with someone, or alienate someone because I reacted inappropriately” brings Ian an opportunity to reflect on his responses each day.

Yasodhara focuses on Dogen’s teachings and embraces opportunities to meditate outside the realm of *zazen*. When facing a difficult social situation, she tries to use that time as an opportunity to practice Zen teachings. For example, when her toddler son misbehaves or she and her husband disagree, she tries to remember Zen teachings and the

[158] “Study: Road Rage Incidents Involving Guns Are Increasing - CBS News,” accessed March 25, 2018, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/study-road-rage-incidents-involving-guns-are-increasing/.

"respond verses react" mindset of meditation to handle those situations.[159] Instead of managing manifested anger, Yasodhara cultivates patience through her study and practice of Zen.

Lin reports that meditation makes him a more pleasant person to be around, especially for his wife and children.[160] One of the most important things Lin has learned through meditation is the acceptance of emotion, rather than suppression. By accepting his emotions, he can better manage his reactions, also referring back to the ability to respond rather than react to situations.

During Andrew's Dharma talk on words and their power, he shared his struggle with fixating on words, needing to choose exactly the right ones to express himself or an idea.[161] That fixation manifested itself in rumination, which he recognizes as a predecessor to anxiety and depression. Andrew speculates that he may suffer from Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), as both of his daughters have been diagnosed, but never received a formal diagnosis or treatment himself. He reports that meditation has helped him "let go" of those fixations and not ruminate or become anxious about word choices.[162]

While not claiming exceptional healing, Dinesh reported feeling better in his daily struggle with depression since starting to meditate.[163]

As I reflect on the ways in which practitioners at ASZC fulfill emotional needs through their Zen practice, I realize the ways I benefited from participating in the

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[159] Goldman et al., *Wayfinder Dharma Talk*.
[160] Goldman et al.
[161] Dietz, *When Words Fail*.
[162] Dietz.
[163] interview.

community for only a few months. Each week I left the center feeling palpably calmer; breathing slower, with less tension in my shoulders. It helped to hear others discuss their struggles with anxiety, depression, and anger as an affirmation that my experiences were not unique. The other people at the center always presented themselves as very hospitable, making me feel at ease despite a lack of knowledge about specific Soto Zen meditation practice. As a Christian, the leaders often affirmed that I could practice Zen meditation and be part of the ASZC community while still maintaining Christian beliefs, although no one I talked to actually lived in that duality of religious identity. More than once, leaders spoke about how being a Zen Buddhist does not require a particular set of beliefs; "you can be a Zen Buddhist and believe anything you want to believe- you are never asked to give anything up."[164] Although only providing anecdotal evidence, experiencing the emotional health benefits of meditation in my own life has provided some affirmation of the phenomenon.

As previously mentioned, the Atlanta Soto Zen Center community is made up of primarily white, middle- to upper class, educated American men. As such, that identity could be shaping the emotional concerns that dominates the group; namely, anger. In a study of Anglo-Western men (white men from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia), Cultural Studies scholar Chris Barker interviewed men who faced emotional crises, including depression and drug abuse, and turned to Buddhism to find solace. Pointing to the broader Western culture, Barker notes "the widespread diffusion of psychological ideas throughout our culture, courtesy of self-help literature and

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[164] Michael Goldman, *Dharma Talk (1 October 2017)* (Atlanta Soto Zen Center, 2017), http://mixlr.com/atlanta-soto-zen-center-live/showreel/.

television shows like *Oprah*" which can both aid and harm those suffering and seeking respite, "fuel[ing] a widespread anxiety that our emotional lives are permanently in difficulty and require attention, that we are in face inadequate."[165] However, the awareness of emotional health has helped people like Barker's Trevor, who has employed Buddhism "as a source of 'skillful means[166]' to manage his emotions."[167] From his study, Barker contends that "the attraction of Buddhism for Western men lies in its combination of individual growth in the context of emotional distress- a rather Western emphasis- and the sense of community that it engenders- a traditional Buddhist strength- that appears to many to have been lost in the West."[168] While by no means conclusive, it is worth considering the possibility of a gendered emotional concern due to the overwhelming majority of men who attend the Atlanta Soto Zen Center.

Beyond the frequent attendees at the center, those visiting for the first time also express a desire for emotional healing. Mike mentioned in a Dharma talk that visitors on a beginners' night most frequently come to the center because they are "troubled."[169] Despite the psychological benefits the practitioners cited, when discussing first-time visitors, a leader noted that many say they want to "center themselves." In response, he

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[165] Chris Barker, "Men, Buddhism and the Discontents of Western Modernity," *Journal of Men, Masculinities and Spirituality* 2, no. 1 (January 2008), https://login.proxy.library.emory.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001857548&site=ehost-live&scope=site. 33.
[166] In Mahayana Buddhism, of which Zen is a part, skillful means (or expedient means) allow students of Buddhism to reach enlightenment through means that fit their needs. Not everyone can reach enlightenment using the same strategies or teachings, so skillful means allow each their own paths to enlightenment. John S. Strong, *Buddhisms: An Introduction* (London: OneWorld, 2015). Kindle Locations 5023-5025.
[167] Barker, "Men, Buddhism and the Discontents of Western Modernity." 33.
[168] Barker. 34.
[169] Goldman et al., *Wayfinder Dharma Talk*.

thought, "Good luck! That's not gonna happen," referring to the inherent unsettling that happens while observing one's own thoughts.[170] Newcomers may find themselves seeking out meditation for healing due to the pervasive health benefits cited in media representations of meditation. In a 2016 analysis of English print news articles about meditation, social scientist Sharon Lauricella found that 88 percent of the news articles mentioned "improvements in work relationships and family life, greater empathy and sensitivity, an increased sense of calm, and 'stress relief,' among other emotional benefits."[171] About a quarter of the articles attempted to "dispel negative myths about meditation, such as that meditation is not 'bohemian,' it is not impossible to do, one does not have to already be calm in order to try it, or that meditation is not just for new-age hippies who listen to too much Cat Stevens."[172] Because of media representations of meditation as a method of handling emotional concerns and a general demystification of Zen as only for the avant-garde, newcomers can find a less intimidating entrance into meditation. One week, a newcomer came to the center specifically to find solace after the recent death of his wife. Although he did not stay for the Dharma talk, the ASZC leader assisting him through his practice told the group that the guest felt more at peace as he left the center that morning.[173] Based on anecdotal evidence from conversations at ASZC and a study analyzing Zen's medial portrayal, I assert that media advertisement of Zen meditation's emotional benefits and demystification of Zen has led to newcomers trying out Zen to find emotional healing.

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[170] Goldman, *Dharma Talk (1 October 2017)*.
[171] Lauricella, "The Ancient-Turned-New Concept of 'Spiritual Hygiene.'" 1756.
[172] Lauricella. 1759.
[173] This comes from an informal conversation during cleaning with visiting priest, Dan, on November 12, 2017.

Other studies have found similar tendencies amongst Buddhist meditation practitioners. In Paul Numrich's study of convert American Buddhists[174], he recounts many of the same findings as those at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center. Ray Jansen, a member at Chicago's Wat Dhammaram, describes feeling "a sense of inner calm and natural orderliness" after meditating.[175] A member of another temple, Dharma Vijaya of Los Angeles, "freely related to me [Paul Numrich] the history of his mental problems, which he has tried to address through his affiliation with Dharma Vijaya."[176] Numrich reports asking "some knowledgeable consultants" about Dharma Vijaya "whether the Americans who come there could be characterized broadly as a 'troubled' lot, they confirmed such an assessment."[177] Sociologist James Coleman finds 20.6 of the respondents in his strongly agreed with the statement 'I became involved in Buddhism in order to help deal with my personal problems,' which was the second highest rate of response.[178] Coleman's study incorporates responses from members of two Zen groups, two Vipassana groups, and two Vajrayana groups, so the results do not represent Zen alone, but still suggest a general trend.

This is all certainly not to say that every person to ever walk through the doors of the Atlanta Soto Zen Center came to deal with emotional concerns, nor that this is the case for all American Zen practitioners. While seeking emotional control or healing may not be the primary focus of every individual practitioner to enter the center, it does however seem to be a common tie between those present during the research timeframe.

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[174] Numrich's terminology.
[175] Numrich, *Old Wisdom In New World*. 111.
[176] Numrich. 115.
[177] Numrich. 118.
[178] Coleman, "The New Buddhism: Some Empirical Findings." 96.

Even in Dharma talks with first-time visitors where I was present, they all shared their feelings with the group, showing some level of comfort with discussing emotional matters with strangers. The emergence of faith and healing in popular discourse has led many to seek out Zen Buddhist meditation to deal with emotional concerns, including the six practitioners in this study and myself at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center.

Suggestions for Further Study

To create a more robust picture of Soto Zen Buddhism in a modern context, further studies could consider the relationship between the growth of the mindfulness movement, as Jeff Wilson discusses in *Mindful America*, and the changing trajectory of Soto Zen Buddhism. As mindfulness develops by offering similar emotional health benefits to those used to promote Zen meditation, one could study how motivations for practicing Zen Buddhism have changed, and try to determine whether the demographics of people practicing Zen versus mindfulness have changed. Such a study could take the form of a comparative study between a mindfulness group, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), and the Atlanta Soto Zen Center. Due to the groups' geographical proximity, one may even find individuals, like Dinesh, who have participated in both groups.

Another research possibility would be to create a broader case study of all the affiliate Zen centers of the Silent Thunder Order. Looking at affiliated centers could provide some insight into the distinctiveness of the Atlanta Soto Zen Center and the Silent Thunder Order, while also highlighting key differences between the centers, potentially based on location, gender distribution, traits of the leadership, and other

distinguishing factors. Since Michael Elliston serves as the primary *Dharma* teacher for all these communities, this could also help create a more complete picture of the uniqueness of his teaching and administrative style. Such a study could provide a broader scope of understanding into the appeal of Soto Zen Buddhism to those who practice it around the United States and Canada.

Conclusion

While spending three and half months meditating with the community at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center, I learned about Zen, meditation, and more than I ever expected to learn about myself. I first embarked on this research to figure out how Christians maintained a dual identity of faithful Christian and dedicated Zen practitioner. However, I ended up being the only one balancing those two identities. Being raised as a United Methodist, I had a specific worldview involving a creator God, a savior Christ, and the ever-present Holy Spirit. Reconciling this with the Buddhist teachings of rebirth and no-self proved problematic for me, and I ultimately determined that I could not be a faithful Christian while fully committing to Buddhist teachings.

However, much like many of the newcomers and frequent attendees at ASZC, I suffered from depression and anxiety and was dealing with the recent deaths of my great-aunt and then grandfather. From meditation, I experienced many of the same healing qualities as the others; feeling palpably calmer after leaving the center, having more energy throughout the day, and taking the time to react more appropriately to emotional events.

Although I ultimately could not reconcile my identity as a Christian and practicing meditation in a Zen center, this research inspires me to continue searching for

Zen practitioners who do hold their Christian and Buddhist identities simultaneously, allowing the beauty of both Christianity and Buddhism to inform their daily lives.

“And keeping with Japhy’s habit of always getting down on one knee and delivering a little prayer to the camp we left . . . I turned and knelt on the trail and said ‘Thank you, shack.’ . . . and turned and went on down the trail back to this world.”

-Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (187)

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