

# Theo 299: Religions of Asia Engaged Learning Research Project

Research Site: Buddhist Temple of Chicago

Research Student: Cameron Pham

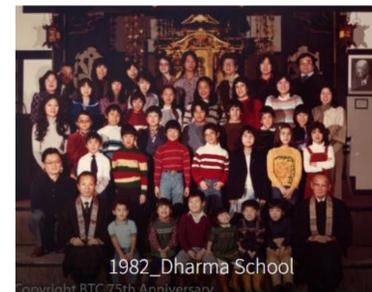
Course Instructor: Dr. Yarina Liston

**Project Goal:** The goal of my research project and the reason for selecting this particular religious site was to expand my knowledge on what East Asian Buddhist practice (particularly Pure Land Buddhism) looks like in America, a country that is quite far from the mother country of this religious tradition. I was also interested in comparing my experience at this temple with my own experience at Vietnamese temples back home.

**Experience:** As part of my research experience, I visited the location of interest. While there, I attended a weekly Sunday service and interviewed three members of the community in order to gain a better and more intimate understanding of what the Buddhist tradition can look like in America. I ensured that all the interviewees would remain anonymous out of respect for individual and communal privacy.

## Interview Takeaways & Common Themes :

- Communalism and acceptance as a prominent draw to the community
- Welcoming atmosphere
- Acceptance of diversity (all 3 interviewees of different ethnic backgrounds)
- Significant Japanese cultural influence
- Celebration of annual/cyclical holidays (both Japanese and Buddhist)
- Development of the community under the context of Japanese Internment and World War II
- Melting Pot America and need for adaptation / appeal to Western audience
- Community for recent Buddhist refugees



**Project Reflection:** After visiting this religious site, I felt that I had gained valuable insights into the local Buddhist community that go beyond the history and traditional dogma discussed in class. Whereas the Religions of Asia course gave me the opportunity to learn about how various religious traditions came to be and what their basic ideologies are, it was just as fascinating, if not moreso, to see and hear about what this community represents in real life and not just on the pages of a textbook. Interestingly, I did not have many conversations about beliefs or theories about Buddhism. Rather, I had many conversations about how the temple is truly an organic and living community that was born out of the devastation of Japanese internment and the Second World War. Furthermore, as the community has grown, it has come to include many different faces and people from all walks of life. Thus, I found that while I visited the temple to learn about religious practice, I ultimately found a community founded upon the preservation of culture and history, the perseverance of the Japanese-American community, and the values of acceptance and diversity.