

**Dharma Drum Buddhist College International  
Student Exchange Program  
Short Term Studying for Course Credits**

**Exchange Student's Report**

**The Experience of a Chinese Buddhist  
Monk in the US**

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## 1.0 Introduction

I was in the second year of my M.A. in Buddhist Studies at Dharma Drum Buddhist College when I heard about the student exchange program between our college and Institute of Buddhist Studies (IBS, a member of the GTU, Graduate Theological Union) at Berkeley, USA. Due to my wish in exploring Buddhism from various academic perspectives as well as in expanding my knowledge in Buddhist studies beyond the horizon of the East Asian scholastic environment, I took this as the perfect opportunity to fulfill my dreams. Hence, I registered in the program without any hesitation and became the first badge DDBC students to participate in the one-year exchange program with a North American Buddhist Institution.

The collaboration between these two institutions was made possible due to the effort of Dr. Payne, the Dean of IBS, and Dr. Teng, Associate Professor of DDBC. Accordingly, they met at the IABS Conference held at DDBC in the summer of 2011 and made the decision to bridge the academic exchange between the two institutions by means of student exchanges. I think that not only we as the students benefit from this program (accommodation and tuition fee provided by the host institution), the schools also fulfill their goals in diversifying the learning opportunity for their respective students.

Officially, the academic program started in September 2012 and ended in May 2013, for duration of 9 months in total. We arrived at Berkeley only a couple of days before the beginning of the Fall Semester and took classes for two consequent semesters as full-time students as part of the requirements of the program.



*The Dean of IBS, Dr. Payne, welcomes the new DDBC exchange students together with Professor Tu at a local restaurant.*

## 2.0 The Institute of Buddhist Studies – a Brief Introduction

IBS (Institute of Buddhist Studies) was established in 1949 in the San Francisco Bay Area. It has been providing graduate-level Buddhist education, ministerial and chaplaincy training, and other educational programs for students in academic field as well as chaplaincy and ministerial services.



*Institute of Buddhist Studies*

IBS is affiliated with the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley with whom it offers a fully accredited Masters Degree in Buddhist Studies. Besides, it is also affiliated with the Buddhist Churches of America — the oldest Buddhist institution in North America — for whom it offers ministerial training for the Jodo Shinshu Buddhist community worldwide.

Academic wise IBS offers a systematic and comprehensive educational program in the entirety of the Buddhist traditions aiming to serve the educational needs of all Buddhists. There are three main programs being offered at IBS, namely the Chaplaincy Programs, the Ministerial Training Programs, and Buddhist Psychology. The faculty members of each of the programs have years of teaching experiences while maintaining their competencies at their respective professions.

Currently IBS has established two student exchange programs with other institutions. One of them is with Ryukoku University at Kyoto, Japan, and the other one is with DDBC. Each year two students from each institution are eligible to apply

into this program and thus study at IBS for two semesters and vice versa. With the joining of more international students from other Buddhist sectarians, the learning experience at IBS has been enriched and thus IBS is able to provide a more challenging and fulfilling study environment.

### **3.0 Courses Taken at IBS**

I take seven courses for the two semesters at IBS. They belong to three main categories: Buddhist studies, Buddhist psychology, and Buddhist and the media.

As on of the courses in Buddhist studies, the ‘Methods in Buddhist Studies’ taught by Professor Dr. Payne exposes us to various methods employed by different disciplines in the academic field in studying Buddhism. In ‘Buddhist Ethics’, the professors provide an introduction to Buddhist ethics and the role of love in the ethical system as found in the Theravada Buddhist tradition. In ‘Special Study in Consciousness-Only’ the professor guides me through some reading materials regarding the Indian Yogacara School of thoughts.

Buddhist psychology is another interesting and important interdisciplinary course offered at IBS. As an introductory course, I take ‘Psychological Aspect of Buddhism’ taught by Professor Kinst, who is also the head of this special department. Moreover, I also take another course, ‘Loss and Grief’, that deals with techniques in psychotherapeutic practices for clients who loss their loved ones. In fact, I find ‘Pastoral Counseling’ offered at Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology, a member of the GTU, to be an absorbing course. Despite being taught by a licensed psychologist and pastoral counselor who has over 30 years of experience, the class participants are a good mix of people of different faiths, both lay and ordained.



*Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology, one of the members of the GTU.*

Finally, 'Buddhism in Film' taught by Professor Scott of IBS is filled with movie screenings and interesting discussions after watching the movies which have Buddhist elements. Not so much into Buddhist philosophical thoughts, this course, however, exposes me to the world of Western media in terms of how Buddhism is understood and practiced in the West.

In general, the courses I choose to take at IBS are very interesting and thought provoking. I learn a great deal through not confining myself in the traditional methods of understanding Buddhism but through different mediums which are still developing in the West.

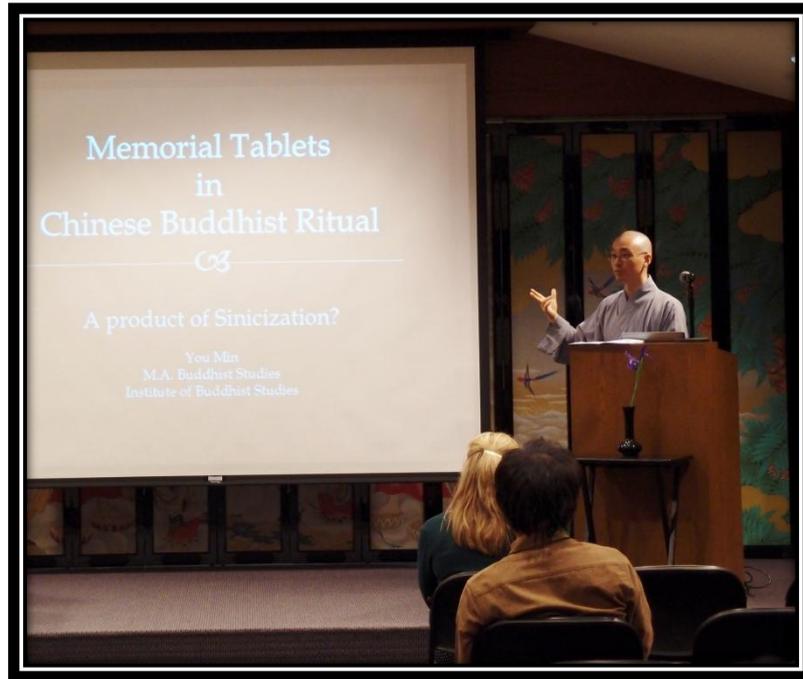
## **4.0 Learning and Living Experiences**

### **4.1 IBS College**

IBS consists of a core faculty of five members and an adjunct faculty formed by sixteen members, thereby offering a wide range of Buddhism related courses that include chaplaincy, ministerial, psychology and Buddhist studies. The faculty members come from diverse backgrounds, and some of them are specialists in more than one area. For instance, there are two professors who are themselves licensed family psychologists and Buddhist priests of the Japanese Soto Zen School. Moreover, as the Dean of the college Dr. Payne also acts as the abbot of a Tibetan monastery in the Bay Area. For me, learning from these professors with such a diverse background is really a bonus. Not only I learn to view a specific Buddhist idea from the academic perspective, I am also able to extend my understanding from certain spiritual perspectives.

Classes are conducted mainly in semi-formal discussion fashions. Readings before each class are extremely important, as all professors expect the students to come into classes already familiar with the discussion topic and prepared with questions to be discussed. The professors will briefly go through the main ideas from the assigned readings before opening the class for discussions. Some lecturers even place one quarter of the final grade on student's participations in the classroom discussion.

What fascinates me most is the eagerness of the American students in taking part in discussions. Most students are able to raise their opinions confidently and on the other hand, are willing to accept critiques from the others. Moreover, the professors are very open-minded toward different opinions and suggestions. As a monastic from the Chinese Buddhist tradition, I can feel that the class always anticipates my opinions on topics related to Buddhism. No doubt this is a great encouragement for me!



*Participate in a Graduate Student Symposium –  
Buddhist Culture, Buddhist Ritual – held at IBS*

Besides, we have to do presentation in class from time to time. We will be assigned topic of discussions and some readings for our preparations. During the presentations, instead of simply summarizing what we have read, we are always asked to speak about our opinions regarding the reading materials. In others words, it is what we think which is more important, but not what we summarized from the papers. For me, this is really a great learning experience!



*Group photo of the class of 'Psychological Aspect of Buddhism' taught by Professor Kinst*

Vast amount of reading, of course, is the most important component of each course. But writing, on the other hand, forms the second most important element. In the course – Buddhist Psychology – for instance, we have to write a reflective paper which is to be read in the class every week. I really appreciate this practice as it trains me in putting my thoughts into words which are then shared with others. I have also learned that the goal of writing is to let our ideas being easily understood by others. Hence, the simplicity, the conciseness, and the accuracy in wordings are the three most important elements in a good piece of academic writing. I have learned to appreciate these through receiving comments and corrections from my professors who went through my papers in details.

#### **4.2 IBS Dormitory**

Apart from attending classes at IBS, my stay at the college dormitory is no doubt another great learning place for me. As a dormitory dedicated to the faculty and students of IBS, the residents are multinational and multicultural. The IBS dormitory is a two-story bungalow with at least 10 bedrooms and a large study area. The study area used to be the lecture hall for IBS students before the current school building was bought and renovated to become the permanent location of IBS. The age of the IBS dormitory is unknown to me, but from one of the photos in the archive cabinet in the study area, I found a photo taken 33 years ago with the same arrangement of furniture in the living room. Nothing much of the building has changed since then, apparently.

There is an interesting blend of internationality in the residence. We have three students from Ryukoku University of Kyoto, three students from other states of the US, one local student, one visiting professor from Japan, and a Sri Lankan monk who has been teaching at IBS for more than 30 years. And among the local students, two are Japanese descendants. As a result, the most common spoken languages in the dorm are Japanese and English. In addition, the Japanese and local students are Buddhist priests from the Japanese Jodo Shinshu tradition, hence, the dorm is definitely a residential place for Buddhist priests of different traditions.

Being a residence of Buddhist priests, however, does not warrant a monastic kind of living experience, or even anything close to that. The reason being that the Jodo Shinshu Buddhist School is very much secularized, in which the priests do not observe the same monastic rules as the Chinese Buddhist monastics do. They can get married, drink alcohol, get a job like everyone else, and only wear Buddhist robes during Buddhist rituals. This is the reason they call themselves priests, but not monk, and I think this is pretty fair since this name clearly differentiate them from the traditional monastic life in most Buddhist traditions.



*A dorm party with housemates*

I like to view to dorm as having the same characteristics as any other university student dormitory. We hold house parties from time to time from the beginning through to middle to the end of semester. Of course ‘parties’ do not mean loud music, barbeque, and drunken people, we are more ‘civilized’ in a sense, although alcohol is still a must for the students. We do ‘potluck’ all the time, where everyone prepare a dish and share with others in the dinner. We chat and sometimes even make new friends who come invited by the residents. I come to realize how important these parties are for the American culture. Since everyone values independence and privacy very much, we as housemates do not interact as often as we do in the Asian environment. Thus, these parties are good ways to hold people together and to get to know each other better.

Living in a multicultural and multinational residence provides great opportunity for me to learn new ideas and to practice patience. From daily interactions with different people to attending dorm parties I have learned to tolerate and appreciate different living habits of people from diverse backgrounds.

## 5.0 Challenges

### 5.1 Physical Challenges

Besides all the great learning opportunities and excitations in starting a new life in a foreign country, there are certain challenges I face which I will now group them into two categories: physical and emotional challenges.

The first physical challenge is the availability of vegetarian food in Berkeley. What I mean here is the food in restaurants. Of course this challenge dismisses itself after I decided to buy my own grocery and fresh vegetable from the market to prepare my own meals. As a matter of fact, vegetarian restaurants are abundant in Berkeley as well as the whole Bay area. Most of the Western restaurants and other oriental restaurants (the Bay Area has a fascinating collection of cuisines from around the globe) serve at least a couple of vegetarian dishes in their menus. But the problem is with the definition of vegetarian food. For us, the monastics from the Chinese Buddhist background, we have to avoid the five pungent roots, not to mention eggs and other meat stocks. But for the Westerners, there are various degrees of vegetarianism and in almost all vegetarian food available out there the use of onion and garlic as ingredients is unavoidable. This is why I always find it inconvenient to eat out and prefer to cook my own food.



*With the great variety of green vegetables available at Berkeley Bowl, grocery shopping has become a leisure activity for me*

It is also interesting to note how different culture approaches vegetarianism. There was one instance when my Japanese housemate wanted to offer me her traditional soup. She was very eager to share her only 'vegetarian' dish with me but I later found out that she used fish sauce in making the base of the soup. I only realize later that for many Japanese, fish is considered 'non-meat'. And I have to learn this through a hard way!

Social life is another interesting aspect at the student's dormitory. While everyone's privacy is well respected, the occasional socializing activities like home parties or go drinking in the pubs are general ways to make friends in the Western culture. The dorm mates love partying. We have at least three to four parties for various occasions throughout the semester. And beers seem to be the most important element during these parties. As little as some new friends may know about Buddhist monastics, they always want to serve us alcohol initially as a way to show their friendliness. Of course they will learn later how 'strict' our ethical codes are as monastics. But it is really an interesting experience to be sitting among group of people drinking alcohol. This is a good chance for me to learn to 'let go'. I have to let go of my self-ego as well as my usual comfort zone to be with others under situations like these.



*Invited to a Thanksgiving party at a friend's house, where turkey and alcohol are a must for this yearly occasion in American culture. Of course, they serve me vegetarian food.*

Another physical challenge comes from the assigned readings from classes each week. In average, I get about 80-100 pages of reading material to be prepared for each class each week. Giving that I take four classes each semester there is a total of 320-400 pages reading material to be covered each week! This is truly a burden, but the reward is great. I realize that my speed of reading has improved significantly through this tough training.



*Reference books for the courses taken at IBS*

## **5.2 Emotional Challenges**

On the other hand, there are also emotional challenges to be overcome. First is regarding the different cultural expectations on this foreign land. Not accustomed to the Western culture, I need to adjust my expectations from the new friends I make here. For instance, while I am used to being courteous during daily interactions with the others, this could become a sign of my non-involvement and passive in the eyes of my Western friends. I realize that to express my true likes and dislikes are the ways to show our independence and self-confidence, and these attitudes are prioritized by my Western friends in judging our sincerity.

One example is when I was asked whether I need a ride to the college because it was raining. Out of consideration for not wanting to trouble my housemate, I rejected

her offer but only to find out later that my acceptance of her help would have made her feel better. Of course this incident is really insignificant, but what I learn from this lesson is that we should accept other's invitation openly and happily since they have offered their help sincerely, and by accepting them with the same sincerity is a means of kindness.

On the other hand, I find that being a Chinese monk in the US is much easier than in many other Asian countries where Buddhism is not popular. While traveling to countries like China and Indonesia, I frequently encountered situations where people were suspicious of my identity (in an unfriendly manner) due to my outfit. The atmosphere, however, is completely different here in the Bay Area. I always meet people who are curious about my robe and they approach me in a very friendly and respectful manner. This is something out of my expectation and I really appreciate it. I have even made some good friends who start to have interest in Buddhism after the friendly encounters!



*Attending a dharma talk at Berkeley Buddhist Monastery*

In general, I find that local people have high respect for people who maintain their unique identities. I do not see a need for myself to be 'westernized' in order to get familiarized with the local culture but instead by maintaining my own identity with dignity I find it much easier to win friendships from the locals.

## **6.0 Benefits of this Program**

The most significant benefit from this program is the improvement of fluency in my English. Living in an environment where English is the only communication medium helps me a great deal in getting familiar with the language. Moreover, I also gain confidence in my English speaking skill through class participation and presentation. I observe some good presenters from my classes and learn about their techniques used in their presentations. On top of that, I have the opportunity to deliver dharma talk during the monthly service at IBS. Preaching to foreigners using English is definitely one of my unforgettable experiences at IBS.

Berkeley is a great place to meet people from around the world with different ethnic background. I have been invited to dinner with a group of Catholic priests who come from different countries such as Italy, England, South America, and Australia. Even though we have different faiths, we share many similar experiences and thoughts. For instance, many of them become priests at a relatively young age and are attending universities learning theology while receiving training at their church. This is very similar to my path of learning after I become ordained and due to our similar age, we become good friends in no time. In other words, the second benefit I get from this program is making many new friends.

The third benefit is the expansion of my worldview. Before this trip I have only familiarized myself with Chinese Buddhism in Taiwan and Southeast Asia. After taking part in various religious activities here I gain better understanding of the development of Buddhism in the US. As a matter of fact, we can find representative of each Buddhist sect in Bay Area including the traditional Chan Buddhist lineage expounded by the late Master Xuan Hua. Accordingly, Master Xuan Hua was among the first Chinese Buddhist monks who arrived at US 60 years ago. Even though his main disciples are the Americans he was able to maintain the traditional Chan monastic culture in its most strict manner. He was highly respected by the locals and had established a good example for other Buddhist temples to follow. I have heard about Master Xuan Hua while I was in Taiwan but coming over to visit his temple and receiving teachings from his American disciples really open up my eyes. From Master Xuan Hua example I have learned the importance of maintaining our unique tradition and identity when we come to a foreign land to expound the Dharma.



*With Dharma Master Heng Sure at the City of Ten Thousand Buddha*

## **7.0 Comments and Suggestions**

The experience I gain from this exchange program is the most meaningful and exciting event throughout my studying period. On top of the benefits mentioned in the above passages, I find that it has also influenced my decision on whether or not to further my study to PhD level after graduation. I realize that the standard of the Western academic research is something I can look upon in order to enrich my research ability in Buddhism.

Moreover, I also feel that it is our responsibility to let Chinese Buddhism to be known and practiced by the Western people. Due to the language barrier, however, currently most Westerners have to depend on English translations of the Chinese texts in order to understand Chinese Buddhism. Since we have the proficiency in both Chinese and English languages, thus we have the advantage in expounding the Dharma in this foreign land. Therefore, I strongly urge all my fellow school mates and friends to take this golden opportunity for the benefit of individual as well as of the Chinese Buddhist community.

In term of the program itself, I suggest that both participating schools, i.e. DDBC

and IBS, should start preparing students for language adequacy which is required by each school as early as possible. For DDBC, we should run English classes that focus on academic speaking and writing skills; for IBS, Chinese classes may be offered for their prospective candidates of this program. Since language is the first requirement before any exchange in ideas and dialogue on academic findings become possible, both schools should display greater initiative in encouraging and preparing students to participate in this meaningful program.

Last but not least is the money issue. As a foreign student at DDBC I am not eligible for the scholarship to study abroad provided by the government and the living allowance I receive from the school is far not enough to cover all my expenses. Therefore, I hope that DDBC will be able to provide enough funding for future candidates who will take part in this program.