

## ***BUDDHIST MEMORIES OF NORMALISATION IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA<sup>1</sup>***

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**ABSTRACT:** This study presents the outcomes of pioneer research on Buddhism in Czechoslovakia during normalisation. The research draws on Misztal's intersubjectivist sociological approach towards memory and focuses on Buddhist narrative reconstructions of the normalisation period. Although reflection on the religious situation during normalisation has not yet attracted much interest, this period undoubtedly influenced the post-revolutionary relationship of Czech society with religion, in particular, its strongly atheistic character. Either because of its historically brief local presence or persistently low membership, Buddhism is not a representative example of religion within Czech society. Nevertheless, its specifics imply that Buddhism can provide a promising study ground for processes related to the presence of religion within a strongly secularised society, such as Czechoslovakia during normalisation. Based on the thematic analyses of autobiographic data, the study reveals the importance of three major narrative themes: an inclusive understanding of Buddhism and the exclusivity of Buddhists, control-based interpretations of the state's relationship towards Buddhists during regime change in 1989, and the ultimate importance of transnational ties.

**KEYWORDS:** Buddhist autobiography, collective memory, normalisation (Czechoslovakia), thematic analysis.

### **ALL THOSE FIRST TIMES**

Research into religion represents one of the major fields of research in the social sciences. Accordingly, the specific religious situation in Czech society today has been paid some attention by scholars.<sup>2</sup> Although the religious situation in Czechoslovakia during normalisation has not yet attracted much academic interest, there is no doubt that this particular historical period

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<sup>2</sup> What receives the most scholarly attention is the large number of people with no church affiliation and the specific face of Czech secularism, e.g., "Religion and Politics in the Czech Republic: The Roman Catholic Church and the State" (Havlíček and Lužný 2013) and "Religion in Czech Silesia: An attempt to explain Czech irreligiosity" (Lužný 2013).

had a vast impact on post-revolutionary Czech religiosity and society's relationship with religion in general.

Because of its historically brief local presence and rather low membership, Buddhism cannot represent religion in Czech society. Nevertheless, considering its specifics it can offer a novel perspective on the complicated situation for religion in the social environment of Czechoslovak socialism. Interpretations of Buddhism range from an easily spreading and culturally adaptive religion on the one hand,<sup>3</sup> to a non-theist philosophy (Bondy 1968) or a socially conflicting and aggressive, politically oriented religion, on the other (Tikhonov and Brekke 2012). Therefore, ignoring its position as a minority religion, I consider Buddhism to be an interesting object for studying the processes related to the situation of religions in a strongly secularised society such as Czechoslovakia during the period of normalisation.

In contrast to the largely fragmented knowledge on the contemporary status of Buddhism within the Czech Republic,<sup>4</sup> several attempts have been made to contextualise the historical evidence of Buddhism in the Czech lands and early Czechoslovakia. By pointing to the personal attraction of Buddhism to many of the first Czech Buddhologists, the work of Rozehnalová (2008), Trávníček (2002) and Holba (2009) demonstrates how different perspectives on Buddhism have emerged historically, while Buddhism as a religious teaching has been disseminated throughout Czechoslovakia since the beginning of the twentieth century.

These scholarly works sometimes directly address the complexity of the social environments that gave rise to the debates on Buddhism (Rozehnalová 2008, 176), pointing out the mutual historical interdependence and practical inseparability of the two environments on which local historical knowledge of Buddhism was built – that of the academic study of Buddhism and that of Buddhist practitioners. In contrast to the original and primarily philosophical debate, which was influenced mostly by German philosophers in the first Czechoslovak Republic, Buddhism today has emerged as a topic within political debate. The pragmatized political conceptualisation of Buddhism was tightly linked to debate in that period on the new Czech religion (Trávníček 2002, 20–23). In addition to the rational, academic and pragmatic political debate on Buddhism, and separate from the pioneering Buddhists' attempts to adopt Buddhist teaching, mainly the Theravada school of Buddhism, we also have reports of the merging of Buddhism and mysticism within Czechoslovakia.<sup>5</sup> The complexity and variability of approaches towards Buddhism within each environment should be emphasised. There were both positive and negative evaluations of the teachings, and sceptical views as well as praise of Buddhism, which promoted its suitability as a religion for the West. On the other hand, the search for the essence of Buddhism and eclectic extraction and utilisation of its particularities were significant first steps in the understanding of Buddhism in the Czech lands and Czechoslovakia. To conclude, I see the major contribution of those scholars who dealt with the early presence of Buddhism as pointing towards four different but linked environments (religious, academic, political and public).

The short passages dedicated to the situation of Buddhism during the normalisation of Czechoslovakia (i.e., the period after the Soviet invasion in 1968 that ends with the Velvet Revolution in 1989) emphasise first of all the negative attitude of the official ideology towards religion since 1948; religion was regarded as the "opium of the masses". In addition, the need to

<sup>3</sup> Western adoption of Buddhism both in the US and Europe has raised the interest of scholars of religion – c.f. *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia* (Baumann and Prebish 2002), *The American Encounter with Buddhism 1844–1912: Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent* (Tweed 1992) and *Crossing and Dwelling: a theory of religion* (Tweed 2006).

<sup>4</sup> The current situation for Buddhism in the Czech Republic lacks any systematic review – c.f. "Development of Interest in Buddhism in the Czech Republic" (Cirklová 2009).

<sup>5</sup> František Drtikol, a significant figure of Czech Buddhism and mysticism, is further described in "Fráňa Drtikol – patriarcha českého buddhismu" (Holba 2014).

compromise the academic interests of Buddhologists was apparent, which eventually resulted in their emigration (Holba 2009, 8–9; Rozehnalová 2008, 174). The period of normalisation is marked by strong repression from the Soviet Union, censorship, restrictions in higher education, emigration and the emergence of samizdat. Holba even mentions the emergence of Buddhist samizdat (Holba 2009, 10–11; Rozehnalová 2008, 176–178). However, the studies of Holba and Rozehnalová, being the only academic reflections on the topic, provide a rather superficial description of the situation for Buddhism and religion in general. The positions of the official ideology imply difficulties in sustaining and spreading religion in everyday life. However, we lack any academic analysis, systematised evidence or in-depth analytical reflections on the presence of Buddhism during normalisation to back up these assertions.

I therefore undertook a new investigation to shed some light on the situation for Buddhism in this period for which we lack any systematised academic commentaries on actual everyday religious lives. In the next section, I introduce the theoretical background and methodology of the research. In the pivotal part, I present the analytical outcomes of my research about normalisation Buddhists. In the end, I conclude my research findings and make several proposals for future research.

## WHO'S WHAT? THEORISING BUDDHIST MEMORIES

With the exception of a few studies dedicated to the topic of gender in socialism (Havelková and Oates-Induchová, 2014, Oates-Induchová 2012, 357–383), it is surprising to find that the period of normalisation in Czechoslovakia has not yet received much scholarly attention, especially with regard to emic perspectives. This is also true of the study of religions where the situation has resulted in an alarming reproduction of stereotypes about the position of religions. Even 25 years after the fall of the communist regime, scholars often simply point to the legacy of communism when discussing contemporary Czech (non-)religiosity.<sup>6</sup> It seems reasonable to look for adequate empirical evidence to prevent us from reaching oversimplified conclusions and from shallow academic theorising about the status of religion in Czechoslovakia and in contemporary Czech society.

One of the reasons that Buddhism in the normalisation period has not been studied may be that it is a minority religion, a fact that has not changed over the last hundred years. Nevertheless, the historical evidence proves that Buddhism has been a part of the local environment since the nineteenth century. Thus, the presence of Buddhism during normalisation should not be regarded as a new phenomenon. Rather, we should ask how the social processes related to normalisation influenced the pre-existing faces of Buddhism and the overall debate on Buddhism within Czechoslovakia. Is the description provided by Holba and Rozehnalová accurate, or are academics just reproducing a stereotypical image of the socialist state's attitudes towards religion? How did the normalisation Buddhists experience the given period of time with respect to their religiosity? There are different ways to explore this research area. I decided to approach those who witnessed the period as Buddhists to find out about their emic perspectives. How do Buddhists remember the period of Czechoslovak normalisation? And would they say their religiosity collided with the overall tone of society? How do they make retrospective sense of their lives in that period of time?

Memory studies have unquestionably become one of the central research areas in the social sciences, attracting scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds. Memory studies

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<sup>6</sup> This also applies to the study of Buddhism – see “Buddhism and Buddhist Studies in the Czech Republic between the First World War and the ‘Velvet Revolution’ of 1989” (Holba 2009), “Czech Perspectives on Buddhism 1860–1989” (Rozehnalová 2008) and “Náboženské vyznání v České republice z perspektivy inter- a intragenerační transmise” (Paleček and Vido 2014).

bring together different approaches to the research of memory and, at the same time, divide academia according to the epistemological grounding and preferences of particular disciplinary approaches. The academic interest in memory, shown by a number of emerging cross-disciplinary research initiatives and publications in the last few years, is not a new phenomenon. In the process of establishing itself as a part of scholarly research, the concept of memory has undergone major changes, while playing a central role in approaches to human cognition, self-perception, social orientation, and history and the interpretation of the past across different disciplines. Disciplines such as psychology, anthropology, sociology, history and political science have provided memory studies with diverse conceptual frameworks. Memory also occupies a significant place in broader academic areas as a part of therapeutic and political discourse, studies of justice and trauma studies. There have been numerous attempts to conceptualise memory according to the epistemological background of these disciplines. This has lent a heterogeneous and intriguingly ambivalent character to the concept of memory itself. The diversity of the concept's usage emphasises the need to define a precise analytical framework whenever memory is central to research.

The first attempt to deal with the collective dimension of memory in the social sciences can be traced back to Maurice Halbwachs (1925).<sup>7</sup> In many respects, Halbwachs overtly continued the legacy of Durkheim's theories of collective consciousness and the importance of ritual maintenance and the transmission of tradition within society. Halbwachs shared Durkheim's belief that every society displays and requires a sense of continuity with the past (c.f. Misztal 2003, 50); however, unlike Durkheim, he was particularly interested in the study of these processes outside tribal religious societies. As Misztal concludes, Halbwachs "initiated the conceptualisation of collective memory as shared social frameworks of individual recollections and, in the Durkheimian spirit, stressed that the coherence and complexity of collective memory tend to correspond to coherence and complexity at the social level and that this seemingly individual capacity is really a collective phenomenon" (Misztal 2003, 4). Today, his concept of collective memory remains a target of criticism, especially for omitting the role of the individual. As well as being a social determinist, he can also be accused of rejecting evolutionary influences and making a somewhat strict division between the biological and cultural conditions of remembering.

Ever since Halbwachs coined the term *collective memory*, and thus drew attention to the role society plays in making decisions about what is to be remembered and what is to be forgotten, social scientists have been explicitly theorising about how *collectives remember* and how culture is transmitted through the processes of remembrance. This is irrespective of whether they are following his initial steps or applying radically different perspectives. There are basically two paradigms used when researching related processes: the first follows the principles of social constructivism and intersubjectivist sociology, whereas the second dwells on the epistemological basis of cognitive science (Lužný 2014; Krátký 2011). The convergence of these two radically different approaches to the (sociological) study of cultural memory has been the wish of few scholars (c.f. Zerubavel 1997); for others, its realisation seems to be rather unlikely unless sociologists can base their research on scientifically plausible grounds that would include experimental methods and testable results. From this point of view, the conceptual gulf between the cognition of the individual and that of the collective cannot be bridged by the intersubjectivist's approach, which lacks plausible scientific grounds (c.f. Krátký 2011). The third way to approach the dilemma of individual and collective memory represents Durkheimian sociology. Whatever solutions have been proposed so far, the question of individual and social dimensions and the transition between them remains an Achilles' heel

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<sup>7</sup> In the publication *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Memoire* (1925), Halbwachs established memory as an object of sociological study.



at the heart of the ever-conflicting sociological discussion on the nature of social cognition and memory.

In this paper, I draw on Misztal's approach to memory as a *process of remembrance*. In her theory of memory, she strives to overcome both the shortcomings and the individualistic bias of psychological theories and the social determinism of many sociological studies by turning to intersubjectivist sociology (Misztal 2003, 6). She argues that the central argument of new intersubjectivist sociological theories of memory is that, "while it is an individual who remembers, his or her memory exists, and is shaped by, their relation with, what has been shared with others and that it is, moreover, always memory of an intersubjective past, of a past time lived in relation to other people" (Misztal 2003, 6). In order to introduce the claims of a new intersubjectivist approach in the study of memory, she states that the collective memory of a group differs from the sum of individual recollections as it includes only those recollections that are shared by all group members (Zerubavel 1997, 96).

Misztal understands memory as a social and cultural process and strives to elucidate how remembering is embodied and embedded in social and cultural dimensions (Misztal 2003, 75). To do so, she further proposes a definition of collective memory as "the representation of the past, both the past shared by a group and the past that is collectively commemorated, that enacts and gives substance to the group's identity, its present conditions and its vision of the future" (Misztal 2003, 25). She insists on retaining both individual and collective dimensions of memory. To study the embodiment and embeddedness of memory, we should pay attention to the way that groups recollect and commemorate. Therefore, when studying the process of remembering (and forgetting) within communities of memory, I assume we should focus on how individual and collective memory is interconnected, i.e., how one mode gets transposed to another through recollections and commemorations. The methodological key to the research puzzle of these two intertwined processes is to focus either on narrative representations (i.e., recollections) or performativity (i.e., commemorations) of the past. As Misztal notes, the majority of studies of collective memory have dealt with the latter (Misztal 2003, 69).

As a cultural form of remembrance, narrative incorporates both individual/autobiographical and collective memories. When we approach memory as a social process, which construes both individual and collective recollections, I suggest that narratives can be identified as a medium that allows the process of social transmission. The question remains, however, to what extent, where and how does autobiographical memory overlap with social memory. To what extent does individual autobiography resemble the collective memory? What do they share in common and how are the contents communicated between them?

Misztal's work suggests that studying memory is possible by looking at the communities of memory (family, ethnicity, and nation) and the institutions of memory that shape our collective memory (e.g., the legal system, museums and media) (Misztal 2003, 15–22). In this paper, I look at the religious community of memory among Buddhists and their recollections of the past, i.e., the normalisation period.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

In order to answer the research questions, I conducted qualitatively-oriented empirical research among those Buddhists who overtly attach themselves to Buddhism and who experienced at least some part of their lives as Buddhists living in Czechoslovakia during normalisation.<sup>8</sup> Ten people who suited the criteria participated in the research.<sup>9</sup> The ratio

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<sup>8</sup> The names of the participants have been changed to protect their anonymity.

<sup>9</sup> Herewith, my thanks to Dušan Lužný and Markéta Vlčková who conducted three of the interviews.

of the overall number of women to men was 2:8 and included one participant with foreign citizenship. The small number of pre-revolutionary Buddhists (amounting to ten in total) limited the number of participants, who came from various Buddhist-oriented groups, none of which were limited to a researcher's predefined perspective on specific traditions, Buddhist schools, or teachings. Hence, in the research, the affiliation to Buddhism is approached rather as a deliberative act or self-description by particular individuals rather than as a predefined research category. Consequently, I understand Buddhism to be a specific concept by which the researched individuals define themselves and through which they also relate to various social dimensions and topics.

In my research, a social group is neither an *ad hoc* nor a naturally-formed group, but a laboratory organised group, which is of major significance with regard to my research goals. The active participants were reached using the snowball method. To meet the research objectives, I conducted autobiographical interviews, some informal and eleven formal, asking the participants to tell me how they became Buddhists. In accordance with Barclay and DeCooke, I understand autobiographical memory to be "the way we tell others and ourselves the story of our lives. Although autobiographical memories are not necessarily accurate, they are 'mostly congruent with one's self knowledge, life themes, or sense of self'" (Barclay and DeCooke 1988, 92, quoted in Misztal 2003, 10).

Additional data were gained from *Český Zen*<sup>10</sup> by Vastimil Marek and *Jednota v rozmanitosti* by Jan Honzík (2010), which both provide Buddhist memoirs from the time of normalisation. Hence, the participants within my research group encompass both active (interviewed) and passive participants (texts). Both types of data have something in common; they are retrospectively-constructed autobiographical stories. Thus, it is not history itself as it happened that the narratives bring forth, but rather, it is the reconstructions of the past that emerge under very specific circumstances after a considerable lapse of time.

I approach the final corpus of the data with a thematic analysis by which I intend to uncover the main themes that give shape to the memories within the Buddhists' narrative reconstructions. What construes the memories of Czechoslovak normalisation Buddhists? What themes are collectively shared within their individual narratives? Although my research group is laboratory-created, i.e., the participants do not share a common organisational structure, I am interested in whether such a group will produce common themes and whether they will interpret these themes in the same manner. I then identify the mechanisms that allow the creation of commonly-shared images of the past. After all, all of them experienced the period as Buddhists. In the following sections, I present the themes I identified within their narratives and I focus on the role that Buddhism plays in defining and presenting these themes.

#### **"PERHAPS I AM NOT A TYPICAL BUDDHIST": THE INCLUSIVENESS OF BUDDHISM AND THE EXCLUSIVITY OF BUDDHISTS**

At the start, the participants emphasised the political and religious orientation of their family; they come from a variety of social backgrounds, ranging from a "Protestant Evangelical family persecuted by the regime" to what they described as "basically an atheist and not anti-regime family". None of the participants adopted Buddhism from a parent or a family member. In most cases, participants presented their inclination to Buddhism as a gradual process (in contrast to a disposable conversion) that was mirrored in the processual development of their Buddhist identity. This was also the case for Milena who arrived at Buddhism through initial interest in Hinduism, Indology and visits to Eduard Tomáš (Skalická 2010, 37), who did not

<sup>10</sup> Marek, Vlastimil in *Český Zen a umění naslouchat*. Retrieved from <http://blog.baraka.cz/> (Date of retrieval 4 May 2015).

belong to a specific Buddhist community at the time but who had a great influence on the Buddhist scene in Czechoslovakia.

Some of the participants only adopted specific elements of what they identified as Buddhist practice or teaching; the relationship of others to Buddhism was characterised by a more or less dynamic development, during which they fluctuated between active membership within a community and more or less isolated Buddhist practice with one preferred Buddhist school. Ivan's depiction of normalisation Buddhist practice resonated with this image:

*That's how it was here, somehow. A somewhat open group of people. In the 80s there was no stable formalised group. It was all absolutely informal activities . . . and people didn't hesitate to find a different teacher of a completely different branch of Buddhism.*

Jiří reflected the tendency for individualised practice: "Everyone has his own Buddhism" was the way he described the specific character of Western Buddhism that also applied, as he assumed, to many Czechoslovak Buddhists. Some respondents, on the other hand, remained consistent by favouring just one Buddhist school or by remaining a member of one particular Buddhist group throughout their whole Buddhist life, as Boris, who has been a member of a Soka Gakkai International (SGI) group for approximately 30 years explained: "I started to practice when I was twenty-three and since then I have been practicing continuously". However, to remain a member of a single Buddhist group seems to be rather exceptional in the praxis of the normalisation Buddhists. In fact, the fluctuations between different Buddhist schools of thought and communities can be recognised as a peculiar feature of the normalisation Buddhist scene. To a certain degree, this contradicts the efforts to establish stable functioning communities:

*I started to be interested in alternative healing practices. Suddenly, when one starts to deal with these ideas he encounters different sort of things – healing practices, Buddhism and so on. At this time, a person called Martin Jára appeared. . . . He brought yoga for shamans and healers and we started to practice it. . . . Yoga is a sort of a fifth column of Buddhism, isn't it?*

So, Jaroslav described his first encounters with "the eastern spirituality" and Buddhism, emphasising the "practice" dimension but also the interconnectedness and inclusivity of different sorts of "alternative practices", vegetarianism and meditation included. He was not the only one who saw these practices as interconnected. Interestingly, some participants also reported acquiring some sort of special capabilities that do not necessarily need to be associated with Buddhism like "seeing people with Roentgen eyes". The inclusiveness of the practices that participants related to Buddhism and the processual development of their Buddhist identity often resonated with an oscillation between individual and collective practice, which made the participants feel that they were not a "typical Buddhist". In addition, for some, their laicism or the fact that they are not professionally (i.e., full time) involved in Buddhism played a role when evaluating themselves as Buddhists.

When referring to the period of normalisation, Buddhism was sometimes used as a subcategory of "eastern spirituality", often vaguely defined, with an inclusive character. This recalled the then popular trend of fascination with the East. The most significant place among these inclusive practices was occupied by yoga and its teachers, not all of whom were foreign. Jiří remembered an Indian yoga master whose lectures he attended and Miloš recalled the early 70s when a Czech woman who had returned from India started to teach the practice of yoga in Czechoslovakia: "It was the first time when yoga officially started to be taught in Bohemia". He added that it was officially taught as a purely physical practice.

Based on what I have described above, can Buddhists living in normalisation Czechoslovakia be approached as a community? Do they function as a community of memory in Misztal's

sense? The way Buddhists relate to the past and describe their own inclination to Buddhism, on the one hand, and the functioning of community life, on the other, suggests that different groups existed that did not deal exclusively with what is understood to be Buddhist practice. These groups were described as constantly undergoing reorganisation, and due to their missing an umbrella structure, different groups did not communicate with each other. Indeed, the respondents were often unaware of the existence of other groups. An example of an absolutely independent development of an individual Buddhist community is SGI, the local existence of which non-SGI participants in my research were unaware.

Nevertheless, Miloš recalled both the sense of community and coherence of “the Czech Sangha” and its unsuccessful attempts to function in an organised manner. He pointed out that the key element in its failure was a lack of authority:

*The Czech Sangha fell apart due not only to their inability to agree on whether to chant in Korean, Sanskrit or English (the Suttas), but because when there was a need to fix something in times of crisis I got up and did it. So they accused me of being a self-declared leader.*

Moreover, some felt that there was no real need to search for strong Buddhist figures or local leaders since they could meet “the real masters” abroad, as I heard, for example, from Václav who, at the same time, recognised the importance of “those mavericks who have been spreading it here”. The internal diversity of Buddhism in normalisation Czechoslovakia becomes apparent on the level of community practices that overtly follow the teachings of a particular Buddhist school. Participants who have been practicing Theravada Buddhism traced the local Buddhist tradition back to the First Czech Republic, whereas Zen Buddhists derive from the American Zen beatniks of the 60s and the Polish Buddhist scene of the 70s and 80s. While sometimes seeking a nationally-rooted Buddhist history and character, participants continued relating to and creating different chains of Buddhist traditions according to their particular orientation.

In particular, after the Velvet Revolution and the unsuccessful attempt to establish an umbrella Buddhist society, the gradual exclusivity among different communities became more apparent when Buddhist-oriented communities and Buddhist schools became official organisations.<sup>11</sup> Due to the rather unstable environment of the pre-revolutionary Buddhist communities, which was enhanced by the fluctuation of the practitioners, some participants share memories of Buddhism in normalisation while others remain outside and create a closed community of memory within their own group-specific narrative. Interestingly, the book *Jednota v rozmanitosti* was sometimes referred to, critically assessed and used to back up participants’ interpretations and memories. This was the case, however, only for those who either participated in its production or were actively involved in what Miloš called the Czech Sangha, i.e., a small Buddhist network of a few “knots”. There is no community of memory that would cover the whole broad spectrum of Buddhism in normalisation Czechoslovakia in sense of a communal commemorating practice. With regard to narrative representations, the way each participant’s memories were reconstructed and when compared with other autobiographies, some are always excluded from the imagined Buddhist social structures even though they created an imagined community of *us*, as Buddhists.

Set during the period of normalisation, the stories demonstrated, over and over again, a collectively shared awareness of the symbolic border between two counterparts – *us* Buddhists and *them*, the regime, represented overwhelmingly by the police. As well as the problem of local leading figures, the problematic issue of authority penetrated more complex and broader narrative areas of their social lives. As I demonstrated in this section, “the mavericks” did not

<sup>11</sup> Currently the only Buddhist organisation that is registered on the state List of Registered Churches and Religious Organisations is Diamond Way Buddhism – c.f. *Jednota v rozmanitosti. Buddhismus v České republice* (Hončík 2010).



necessarily see Buddhism as being incompatible with other religious teachings and practices, whereas for other participants, Buddhism was associated with a concrete Buddhist school. Whatever differences in narrative interpretations of Buddhism they formulated, Buddhism was repeatedly presented against the background of the dual relationship to politics on the one hand and religion on the other, while being related to both the personal and societal development levels. The next section discusses how participants reconstructing memories of their lives in Czechoslovakia during normalisation reproduced signs of a collectively shared need to define themselves as being against the regime.

#### **“MAYBE THEY WERE MONITORING US”: RECOLLECTING MEMORIES OF THE PRACTICES OF DOMINATION**

When participants spoke of the normalisation period they invoked regular gatherings of groups practicing Buddhism sometimes in combination with other “alternative practices”, including various forms of art. By addressing these groups as “we”, “Buddhists”, “the spiritual reservoir” or even more generally as “alternatively thinking people”, their narratives demonstrated the awareness of a collectively-shared past. Buddhism was repeatedly defined as being part of a broader category of an alternative to what was understood to be a common way of life in Czechoslovak society and the ideology proclaimed by the socialist state. As summarised by Jiří:

*For me, and I think not just for me, the reading of illicit literature (Buddhists texts included) meant a sort of corrective, an alternative, to the officially offered and intellectually poor world. It was actually a part of our education, you know? And it was passionate for me. That's why I stuck with the reading, I started to write and so on. There simply were alternative views on life, different ways of experiencing, you know? So we were simply reading because we needed to talk to someone who tells the truth, you know. Here you simply did not get this – in school or elsewhere – but from dissent or friends.*

He also described “the grey zone of people who decided not to get along with the system”.<sup>12</sup> The inclusive definition of Buddhism is thus transposed into the wider socio-political scheme. To be a Buddhist in this rather broad sense means to become a part of the “alternative zone” that is opposed to the deceitful institutions, the political regime and the world of ordinary Czech people.

However, being a part of an “alternative zone” involved activities associated with Buddhism that were interpreted as *not allowed*, and to take part in them implied receiving undesirable attention from the controlling organ – the police – and risk of persecution. As Miloš commented, while talking about the regular meetings of 10 to 20 people: “Those days you could not talk about meditation. It was controlled by the Secret Police. One could not practice it”. The participants repeatedly demonstrated a shared awareness of a collective identity by positioning themselves (i.e., Buddhists, and alternatively thinking people) against the political regime and the police, the empowered organ of socialist state control. The power relations between the two counterparts were constituted through the control of activities “derogating from the normal standards”. According to the narratives, although participants supposed themselves and similarly-oriented people to be observed by the police, the police did not see them as causing any real trouble unless their activities (e.g., correspondence with western countries, active dissemination of alternative ways of thinking and living, and the organisation of alternative cultural/religious events) became socially “too apparent and influential”. This kind of persecution occurred when a person participated on suspicious and not necessarily

<sup>12</sup> For further illumination of the topic of grey zones in former Eastern bloc socialist states, see e.g., *Ethnographies of Grey Zones in Eastern Europe: Relations, Borders and Invisibilities* (Knudsen and Frederiksen 2015).

exclusively religious activities. As Jiří commented: “It was all marked by the fear of the Secret Police and the trouble that one could get in”.

Even though different groups did not necessarily communicate with each other, and the existence of some were not known by other groups until today, the narratives show a strong sense of abstract collectiveness among Buddhists, enhanced when positioning themselves against the political regime. In their narratives, the opposition was articulated with various intensity. On the one hand, there was a mere awareness of the division between *us* and *them*, connected with the necessity of keeping their activities quiet; on the other hand, there were actual acts of persecution and imprisonment. During the 70s and 80s, participants recorded several acts of police control, interrogations and imprisonments.<sup>13</sup> For example, Vlasta Marek, understood to be an influential figure and one of the so-called important “mavericks”, was at the same time reported as the one who “was venturing his mouth” and therefore faced problems with police, including detention and several months of imprisonment.<sup>14</sup>

In some narratives, the opposition had a merely latent or modest force, as Boris described: “No one caused us any trouble. Maybe they were monitoring us after we got married. It’s hard to say. But I am not aware of it”. He added that although they were not really strict about practising in secret, they nevertheless kept it quiet when it came to chanting in their flat. The tension between statements is apparent; on the one hand, he tried to show that their situation was not critical; on the other hand, he admitted that they were cautious about being too loud in their religious practice. Accordingly, some participants tended to characterise their own group or Buddhists in general as a non-confrontational community. Phrases like “we were hiding it” or “it was better not to provoke them” catch the dividing line between participants and the regime, in which the power of the state was coped with in a rather submissive manner:

*But there was no one persecuted just because of Zen or Buddhism directly, I think . . . . You have to understand that then, in whatever way, people were more publicly involved, they gained the attention of the State Security Service, you know? It did not have to be politics; it could have been anything of cultural or alternative affairs. Anything that derogates from the normal standards, you know, was what they paid attention to. I think that they were monitoring us somehow, but we were not dangerous for them. But those who did something more among people received more attention. . . . You know, this is trivial because they didn’t beat us nor did they imprison us, so there is basically nothing to talk about.*

Ivan’s depiction of the situation represents a tendency to characterise the control-based relationship as not really that bad. This rather striking interpretational element appeared in several narratives. Perhaps it is an expression of the collective resistance to the authority of the regime, one of a number of possible strategies to cope with the domination of the opposition by denying its real impact and downplaying the previously-suggested argument. The reference to the absence of physical violence and indirect restrictions demonstrates a refusal to accept the relevance of the imposed power balance along with its dominance. I witnessed this sort of contradiction quite often.

As well as defining themselves as being against the regime, participants often depicted themselves as an alternative minority, which rejected the life style and the way of thinking of the majority. The category *us*, when meaning “alternatively thinking people” or “spiritual reservoir” is thus opposed to “the majority”, “the ordinary people” or simply “people here”, “the sceptics” or “the non-believing Czechs”, “the little Czech nation” or just “the Czech

<sup>13</sup> C.f. Marek, Vlastimil. *Český Zen a umění naslouchat*. Retrieved from <http://blog.baraka.cz/> (Date of retrieval 4th May 2015).

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

society". Wendy married a Czech man and came to Czechoslovakia in the 70s. Her reflections on normalisation highlight strongly negative impressions with regard to Czech society:

*It was very hard here. I didn't know at all that you must wait in a line for certain groceries. And the people here were very, very closed. In the streets . . . I was suffering so much because I did not have any friends here. I was a housewife . . . we came in 1972. It was terrible. People in the streets were so sad, they didn't smile. They were even coarse, I would say.*

Interestingly, this opposition towards Czechs in the normalisation period is common for both the immigrant and the Czech-born Buddhists. Certainly, it is closely related to the fact that the participants acknowledged a negative relationship between Czechs and any belief or religion. The difficult local conditions for learning about Buddhism were emphasised by Miloš:

*In the 70s when I started with Buddhism, it was an issue for only a few intellectuals. Doctor Tomáš or long ago in the First Republic Drtikol and Minařík. And these people were surviving even in the 50s. And no one knew anything. I did not even know there was anything like vegetarianism. No one spoke about it. . . . I was searching for what to do with my life because I knew everyone was pretending. Especially after '68, it was absolutely clear.*

The opposition towards Czech society, the desire to go beyond what it was like to live a normal life did not only characterise Miloš' case. Some reports demonstrated the reasoning behind the participants' inclination to Buddhism as a sort of revolt against the normality that was lived by the people and proclaimed by the regime. Miloš' description explicitly captures the domination of the state over the common people along with those who searched for alternatives: "Everyone let them go gaga. There was just a small percentage of those rebels and the communists always had a lever on them".

Both forms of opposition remained relevant when they talked about the post-revolutionary period; the representatives of the regime turned into "the government", "the bureaucracy", "consumerism", or "the American-like system". Criticism of the current state of society was always implicit in the participants' view. Criticism of the Soviet Union, which was understood to be both the ideal model for our society and its leader, was later replaced by criticism of the western societal model represented by the US and its superiority. Vaclav, summarising his critical view of both social systems, commented: "It is not an occupation as it used to be when the Russians occupied us with the tanks. But basically they occupied us only silently. And now there is this band of market capitalism builders who, I think, have finished their building". When comparing the pre- and post-revolutionary period, Miloš concluded: "I am a dissident again". He sees himself to be as likely to be persecuted by the new regime as he was during normalisation. He considered the communists to have a "sixth sense for the anti-regime activists" just as the representatives of the current regime have a sixth sense for "intruders" and "haunt them just as hard as they used to". Hence, the critical evaluation of the dominant societal models and its proponents span the political regimes, creating an important aspect of the participants' collective memory. As a form of critical stance towards society and the way it functions, Buddhist memories traverse the past and present. The symbolic distances in the participants' memories were bridged not only in the area of temporality but also in the case of nationality and national state borders.

## THE ULTIMATE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSNATIONAL RELIGIOUS TIES

The autobiographies reveal the importance of cross-border religious transition, the creation of international Buddhist networks during the normalisation period and their maintenance after the Velvet Revolution. In this section, I focus on the way participants produced retrospective

images of international communication and the role Buddhism played. The narratives provide a form of social expression, which frames the way we share our perceptions of spatial and temporal dimensions. Space and time are thus inseparably interlinked with story-telling.

By structuring their life experience into the pre- and post-revolutionary periods, participants repeatedly highlighted the last major socio-political change in 1989. They framed their autobiographical stories by reference to how society has changed since they became involved in Buddhism. In the pre-revolutionary period, *here* was referred to as “communist Czechoslovakia” (Vystrčil 2010, 50), “Bohemia” or “the crater of Czech land”.<sup>15</sup> The spatial dimension ultimately took on specific connotations related to the socio-political situation, which I discussed in the previous section, such as “the old regime”, “the time of concealment” (Komrska 2010, 45) or “the dark times of normalization” (Slavická 2010, 38), “in the rigid totalitarianism” or “fifty years of occupation and unfreedom”<sup>16</sup>. Sometimes it was not the time of normalisation but the whole period under communism that was captured and often depicted as something one had to resist, to not “let the regime buy you”.

Importantly, the characteristics of *here* then arose against the background of the situation *there*. Countries such as Poland, Germany, Austria, Netherlands and France, but also the US, Sri Lanka and Japan played major roles in establishing a local Buddhist basis for different Buddhist-oriented communities and schools during the normalisation period. As well neighbouring European ties, new relations have been established at the global level, quite independently of the existing ones. The period’s geo-political division of the world into the East and the West also found its place when recalling international communication.

In the case of the former Eastern bloc, Poland occupied a privileged position. Typically described as a more liberal country in terms of religious matters, in addition to Christian churches, Poland was home to various Buddhist groups, i.e., Tibetan Buddhists (Diamond Way Buddhism) and the Zen Buddhists (Rinzai and the Kwan Um community). The situations in Czechoslovakia and Poland were contrasted; Poland was depicted as an important source of Buddhist knowledge as well as a place of direct transmission of Buddhism to visitors from Czechoslovakia. At the same time, Poland mediated contacts with Buddhist teachers (i.e., Sueng Sahn) from Asian and American states. Ivan recalls that: “They [the Poles] had already had several Zen groups at that time (around 1980)”, comparing the situation in Poland to the practically non-existent state of Zen Buddhism in Czechoslovakia. Remembering the internal diversification within Polish Zen communities, he commented: “They were dealing with Zen absolutely independently of me or the Korean Master. They had it set differently – through the intellectual dimension, art, the conceptual art. They organised art happenings. They had it from America”.

The division of Buddhist Zen schools in Poland was reproduced in Czechoslovakia. In the case of participants who visited Zen Buddhist communities in Poland which were “a long way ahead of us”, the regular journeys to and fro were not remembered as being difficult to achieve. Hence, being comparatively easy to reach and having richer resources, the Polish Buddhist scene obviously had a large impact on the development of socially organised forms of Buddhism in Czechoslovakia during normalisation. Describing the transfer of Buddhism from Poland to the Czechoslovak capital, Prague, Ivan commented: “[W]e started to travel there [to Poland] with friends, and together here (back home; authors note) we created such a

<sup>15</sup> Marek, Vlastimil. *Český Zen a umění naslouchat*, p. 54.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*



small group. In the beginning, there were perhaps seven of us practicing by ourselves in our flats. Two times a week we were somehow gathering there”.

On the other hand, when Boris talked about his first journey to Japan, he mentioned the difficulties he had to face before being given official permission to leave the country:

*I got to Japan due to the people I knew, and with a foreign exchange promise. It was difficult but not impossible . . . . You could get these foreign exchange promises only once in a while and sometimes not even that. And no one would let you know that you did not get it. They did not even answer – the policemen.*

He recalled the dominance of the system together with the arrogance of its representatives. Wendy talked about the circumstances for travelling to her country of origin that was part of the symbolic western world: “I could travel there because I had my family there. But the truth is I had to apply for a re-entry visa every time” she said and then made a comparison with the overall situation for Czechs. To travel abroad: “was not easy for the Czechs at all. And when they received the permission they really had to have several signatures (of the officers; authors note)”. One strategy to cope with the difficulties was to reverse the direction of the activity, i.e., instead of travelling abroad, Buddhists invited Buddhist teachers to Czechoslovakia. This was the case, for example, with SGI and the regular visits held by the Austrian community leader Mr. Nakamura, with the first visit of Ole Nydahl, the European leader of Diamond Way Buddhism, and with “the Prague Buddhists” before the Velvet Revolution had been documented (Komrska 2010, 45).

During the 70s and 80s before the internet had been widely adopted, postal correspondence was another coping strategy to maintain international Buddhist relations. Publications from second-hand bookstores and what Václav called “the smuggled literature” served as a basic knowledge source for Buddhists in Czechoslovakia and as a foundation for Buddhist-oriented samizdat literature. Hence, the active producers of samizdat who dealt with Buddhist topics not only drew on older literature, which was still partly available unofficially, but more importantly they used material distributed through active communication channels with foreign countries during the normalisation period. The way they talked about these activities clearly implied the notion of state control intervening in the sphere of international postal exchange at the local level: “The police has been controlling my correspondence since my journey to Japan”, reported Miloš and added that after his imprisonment “they confiscated hundreds of copies of letters, all samizdat, handwritten documents, but also my typewriter with its amplifier and hundreds of cassettes”.

Generally, in comparison with other countries, the situation for religion in Czechoslovakia was depicted as more difficult due to the state’s religious policy and a Czech society that was sceptical, critical and unfriendly to religion. Nationalities such as the Polish, Austrian or Japanese were often compared with Czechs and the Czech social, political and religious environment. Even when specifically referring to the Czechs as *us*, Czechs come out worse in comparison with other nations or they ascribed negative characteristics to them. Miloš recalled the impression his Czech group made when visiting Polish Buddhist centre: “We were all like little monkeys”. With regard to religion, Czechs were defined as “atheistic heathens” or “those with no-real-big religious ambitions”, whereas the negative connotations regarding their national character resonated with words like “close-mindedness” or “closed nature”. The narrative depiction of Czechs as a nation was negative in comparison with other nations, but particularly so with regard to religion. The producers of these negative depictions, i.e., the Buddhists themselves, did not always passively accept the state of affairs. For example, Miloš

said he “offers alternatives to his Czechs” and Buddhism was often depicted as a “suitable religion for the sceptic Czechs”.

The early *post-revolutionary* period, i.e., the 90s, was referred to as “after November” (Komrska 2010, 46), “after the eighty-ninth”, after the “Velvet upheaval”, and the participants emphasised its positive aspects, depicting it as “the times of just-opening freedom” (Vystrčil 2010, 49). The 90s meant high hopes for political affairs and the development of society in general, Buddhists included. However, unfulfilled visions both for local Buddhism and socio-political affairs in general, led to a critical stance towards society once again. Inherent in their post-revolutionary reflections was a persistent resentment towards the state, the political regime and the overall situation in Czech society, which was mirrored onto the transnational dimension: “They were rattling with their guns before here, didn’t they? ‘With Soviet Union forever and never any other way’. But then there is the other extreme that now they think the American consumer way of life is the only one”. In this way, Vaclav expressed his scepticism towards the development of the local socio-political situation, while revealing its transnational characteristics.

Obviously, although I specified the time and location of the research beforehand (the normalisation Czechoslovakia), the originally demarcated area of focus became unsustainable when considering the content of the empirical data. Even when repeatedly pointing out the limited possibilities for cross-border exchange, both in the sense of personal travel and postal transmission, Buddhists recognised the importance of these ties for the establishment of their local communities as well as the international Buddhist networks. Cross-boundary relations had an undeniable influence on the development of the local Buddhist scene along with the formation of what Václav, along with others, called “the illegal groups”. Buddhism, but often not Buddhism exclusively, was described as motivating people to cross the international borders ignoring the obstacles such an act presented or could result in. By referring to international relations, Buddhists solved both their negative attitude towards Czech society and the lack of local religious sources, thereby reconstructing a sort of religious transnational memory of how the normalisation Buddhists used to function. By looking beyond their religious ties at the nation-state level, the participants maintained the memory of the socialist state’s oppressive regime along with interpretations of their own coping strategies. The spatiality of collective religious identities occupies a much broader space within the autobiographies. Within the limited space of this section, I have attempted to highlight the dimension that reaches beyond national borders. By using autobiographical interviews, the verbalised reflections on this dimension opens up yet another unexamined area of Buddhism in Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the first part of this study, I summarised academic discussion on the local presence of Buddhism. Since existing research into the field of Buddhist studies and Buddhism ends where the period of normalisation begins, I designed empirical research that aimed at shedding some light on this reality, not yet examined from a sociological perspective. Although its historically brief local presence and low membership means that Buddhism cannot represent religion for Czech society, the research outcomes prove that the study of Buddhist reflections is relevant for an even broader area, which entails, for example, the relationship of the state and religion or religious transnationalism.

In the research, I utilised Misztal’s conceptualisation of memory, which defines memory as a social process of remembering, and I examined narrative recollections within the Buddhist community of memory. The narratives offered an ultimately novel perspective on the situation

for religion in the social environment of normalisation Czechoslovakia that has not yet been examined by social scientists. The thematic analysis of data revealed three major topics in their retrospective narratives, which I covered in three separate sections.

After revealing the inclusiveness of Buddhist religious identities, I pointed to the emic concept of “the maverick”. This concept captures a particular retrospective historical image of a Buddhist-oriented practitioner in normalisation who finds strategies to cope with the lack of information and access to resources. What Jaroslav called the “spiritual roots of society” denoted the inclusivity of Buddhism on the collective level. It referred to the phenomenon of merging people of various religious backgrounds who were or could potentially become persecuted by what they called “the regime”; this was a sort of unifying strategy against the adverse social and political situation. Nevertheless, based on the references to each of the participant’s memories of community praxis, it also became clear that there never was a unified community of Buddhists nor did the diverse communities establish a comprehensive communication network. Nevertheless, their individual recollections imply a level of commonly-shared memories among the participants when denoting different degrees of opposition towards the socio-political settings of normalisation Czechoslovakia.

There were reports of various types of “life predicaments in that regime”, as referred to by Karel, to which the second section was dedicated. It discussed the way participants depicted the regime and its most significant associations with control-based and occasionally repressive action via the secret police. As illustrated through extracts from autobiographical stories, some opposition towards the regime of the socialist state was present in every interview, regardless of the degree of dominance. Interestingly, even the confidantes<sup>17</sup> were described as the victims of the regime since the police also “had something on them” so that their lives or the lives of their families were threatened. The section also reveals that religious orientation functions as a part of the broader collective identity that was sometimes inseparable from political orientation.

The search for alternative lifestyles and schools of thought along with the need to stay within the “grey zones”, the awareness of being controlled by the socialist state control apparatus, which could and sometimes did act repressively, characterised most of the participants’ narratives. Defining oneself or the collectives to which one belonged as being against the regime ranged from a rather covert opposition to full articulation of the illegality of Buddhism, including examples of concrete acts of persecution. As a result, we should speak of a Czechoslovak dissent, which *some* Buddhists – either those who fell into the category due to their family background or those who carried out acts of rebellion (not mutually exclusive) – were part of, rather than their belonging to a separate, exclusively religious or even an exclusively “Buddhist underground”. The autobiographies directed strong criticism towards Czech society as well as giving a negative depiction of Czechoslovakia and its political regime during normalisation.

According to Myszta, “[r]emembering submits the past to a reflective awareness and it permits, by highlighting the past’s difference to the present, the emergence of a form of the critical reflection and the formation of meaningful narrative sequences” (2003, 10). The narratives revealed that Buddhists did not all share the same standpoint towards the Czech nation. Even on the individual level, some had inconsistently critical views both towards the Czechs and the state, and would continue to hold those views after the Velvet Revolution in 1989. Hence, the basis of the participants’ argument was identified as follows: 1) as dependent on the national character of the Czechs and resonant with the idea of a common Czech cultural identity; and 2) as the result of external constraints (i.e., the Soviet Union and the US) that

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<sup>17</sup> persons blackmailed by the political police.

the state supports through the instrumentalisation of specific tools to consolidate the current political regime (e.g., the control of the police or the promotion of consumerism after 1989).

The study illustrates how Buddhists made sense of their lives in normalisation Czechoslovakia and how this process ultimately led to the creation and expression of their view of the period. The temporal division between the pre- and post-revolutionary periods framed their reports. This enhanced the ability to make a comparative analysis of the extremely rich material reflecting development within Czech society against the background of regime upheavals.

Misztal's intersubjectivist approach towards studying memory allowed me to analyse the commonly-shared level of representations of the past among independently functioning Buddhist-oriented individuals. Finally, a few things should be noted. As a researcher, I evoked the participants' stories associated with past. As a result, when interpreted through the theoretical lenses which understands memory as a social process, I personally became a constituent part of their memories. In addition, even though the participants did not function as a coherent group and thus never shared a common narrative of the past that could be reproduced through collective commemorations, their autobiographies documented common features and a sense of shared collective identity. In other words, the awareness of what it meant to be a Buddhist in normalisation Czechoslovakia and what it means today had common characteristics regardless of an individual's inclination to a particular Buddhist teaching or practice. Both the individual and collective level of Buddhist memories are represented in the autobiographies. In other words, and I wish to stress this point, the collected and analysed autobiographies have themselves become materialised memories, i.e., a sort of embodiment of Buddhist collective memories of normalisation Czechoslovakia.

However, research of this type cannot provide an exhausting or factually truthful account of history as it happened. The human memory is an insufficient resource for this kind of information. When working with memory, we face serious pitfalls that result from its foremost characteristic – the inability to reconstruct the actual past on the basis of human remembrance of it. An awareness of these properties of the human mind and memory does not devalue the relevance of my research and its goals. By accepting that human memory and the concrete memories of my participants are fallible, I do not mean to disparage the value of their narratives. On the contrary, in my opinion, the methods used match the research questions.

It was not the aim of this study to make a list of all names involved. A lot of important names were not mentioned. Further, the need to make the reports anonymous made it difficult to replicate the quotations with reference to concrete names, places and situations. Further examination of this research area would need to include an analysis of something more than these kind of retrospective subjective reconstructions. First, it would need to take into account archived police records, academic output during that period and historical material such as Buddhists' photos. It would be useful to examine how one concrete Buddhist community, i.e., the community of memory, remembers the past and to focus on what Misztal calls commemoration acts. Throughout the research it became clear that although examining Czechoslovak society, in practice, the autobiographies excluded Slovak society from the debate.<sup>18</sup> My attempt to carry out an interview with one Slovak normalisation Buddhist was unsuccessful. In addition to reflections on Slovak Buddhists, future research on normalisation Buddhism should focus on immigrant communities of Buddhists from Vietnam, which have been overlooked to date.

If the aim of the social scientist is to understand and explain the religious situation in contemporary Czech society, there is no doubt that the historical period of normalisation

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<sup>18</sup> There is one mention of Slovak Buddhists, Zuzana and Oleg Šuk (Komrska 2010, 45).



and the relationship between the state and religion need to be studied carefully. My research provides a pioneer insight into the topic of Buddhism in Czechoslovakia and points to important continuities that shaped the (trans)local religious memory. However, more importantly, I hope to use the findings of the study to open a discussion on the unexamined reality of the relationship between the state and religion in the period of normalisation and later. Together with what needs to be studied in this area of research, academia should acknowledge that itself serves as a mnemonic community bringing newly emerging memories of the past into the light of the future.

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