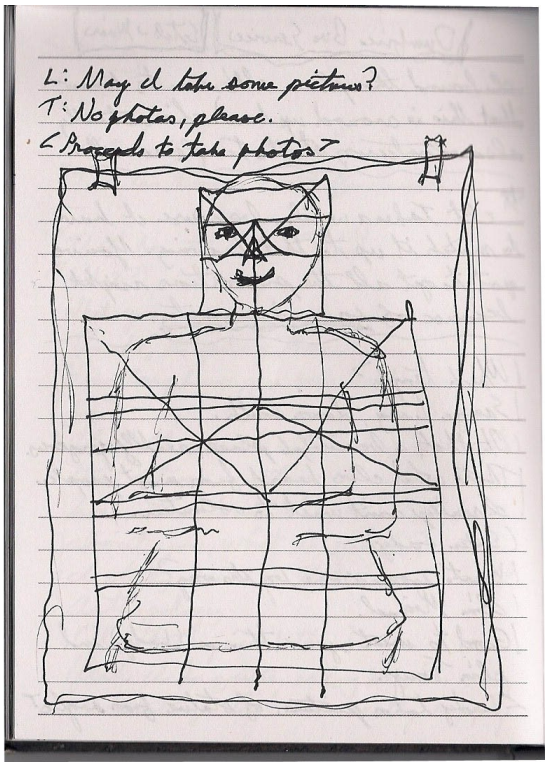


Drawing in my fieldwork notes of the Trey's (the sculptor's) blueprint for a clay Buddha sculpture drawn in proportions with Tibetan sacred geometry.

Ethics and Ethnography: My Fieldwork Account in a Dundee Meditation Centre

Michael Melia

I tried applying many thematic approaches to my encounter, as my field notes frantically illustrate. When it came to writing up my experiences, I attempted to synthesize my ideas and my data to create a cohesive document about my interest. Yet I realized, unexpectedly, that I was committing violence to the people I worked with. I was bending their voices to fit my theoretical approach. In trying to avoid this, I thought clearly and lucidly about my experience, the data-gathering process, and relations in the field. I was trying to come to terms with the face-to-face contact that I had with other people I meditated with, in order to justify my use of turning them into raw material for my theories. What I ended up with was 3,000 words of my fieldwork account.

This is the focus of my ethnographic encounters project. What follows is my process of living in the field and living with the people that inhabited it. I will begin by explaining my reasoning in focusing

on *process* in lieu of a thematic product. Following, I will go into my fieldwork account.

My encounter was based in the Tibetan Buddhist Rokpa Samye Ling Centre in Dundee. I attended three sessions, originally unbeknownst to others that I was conducting research. I had private interviews with two practitioners there, Robert and Jennifer. The sessions I attended were meditation classes, called 'mindfulness meditation' classes. The space was divided between a meditation hall and a tearoom café next door. Robert and Trey worked there, as a monk and leader of our meditation group and a sculptor, respectively—the rest of the group were lay practitioners who came as I did.

Ethnographic ethics

This project is limited to ~3,300 words. In this space, it is easy to abandon the process of fieldwork and the production of one's ethnographic data for a thematic approach. The danger I concern myself with in this is that face-to-face encounters are abstracted to fit the author's paradigm, losing their immediacy in the field and thus distancing the written account from the actual encounter. Castaneda warns that fieldwork then 'corresponds not to the right then and there, but to the subsequent re-constitution of information and experience as knowledge in writing, text, and representation that circulates for other audiences and viewers detached from the specific time and space of fieldwork' (Castaneda 2006: 96). This abstraction process is inevitably the process of writing up texts, but *it is problematized with this project, as the limited space forces us to shape our engagements to extreme contours that do injustice to the people we've worked with*. This commits violence to our experiences, voices, and process.

Le Roy Ladurie's work, *Montaillou*, is a prime exemplar of this violence that we, as ethnographers, have an ethical duty to avoid. The book attempts to use an inquisitorial register to paint a picture of the 14th century French peasantry. With a very brief introduction on how the document was made, he plunges in to dissect its contents with faux-ethnographic methodology. In attempting to present the register as an impartial standpoint for his observations, he writes:

> In very rare cases the record does speak of young women who married according to the dictates of their heart. The Register, however, speaks of quite a number of young men who did so. But in the institution of marriage as it then was, the woman was regarded as an object – an object loved or an object beaten, as the case might be. The historian finds himself faced with an area of cultural silence on this subject. (Le Roy

Ladurie 1978: 189)

Le Roy Ladurie not only assumes *why* the women did not speak, but it also conflates *what the peasant women expressed in court* with *what the peasant women expressed outside of court* by implicitly denying difference between the two areas. Rosaldo continues, 'Whether the issue was skirted because of women's reluctance to talk about possibly heretical love magic, out of mutual recitence between women and their male inquisitors, or owing to the historian's imputed 'cultural silence,' simply cannot be decided on the basis of available evidence' (Rosaldo 1986: 82). By assuming their motivations, the author extends his interpretation over their voices, doing violence to the very people he's trying to foreground. Moreover, Le Roy Ladurie decides on his own account the things that are not told to the court 'represent areas of cultural silence' (Rosaldo 1986: 82). He declares they are non-existent: unequivocally denying agency to the voices of these women. Running counter to his project again, the author ultimately silences those he attempts to voice. These problems would be resolved with more attention to how the register itself was produced: under what conditions relations were negotiated, and the process through which these relations were negotiated that resulted in the voices of the document.

These aspects of production, negotiation and process are underdeveloped in the author's work; they are aspects of my encounter that I will emphasize in order to avoid similar problems. Especially because of the word limit I must adhere to, I aim to minimize any violence done to voices and my experiences by foregrounding the process of my ethnography. Instead of engaging with thematic paradigms and sweeping generalizations, I aim to promote a reflexive, ethical account of my encounter by focusing on the evolving moment—the 'right then and there' (2006: 82)—of my fieldwork experiences.

Fieldwork dynamics: context and process

The opening up of context in my fieldwork was a reflexive process. Context, I define borrowing the Foucauldian *episteme*, but on a micro-scale. Context is a 'constantly moving set of articulations, shifts, and coincidences that are established [to make] it possible to grasp the set of constraints and limitations which, at a given moment, are imposed on discourse' (Foucault 1972: 191). These articulations sum up to a background consensus in the Rokpa Centre, with implied boundaries; this context specifies both form and content of discourse – i.e., how one speaks and what one can, or

should say. The development of this context envelops of all my ethnographic data. Foucault's articulations, shifts and coincidences *are* each and every observation, conversation, side-comment, gesture and movement as contained in a given context that specifies how to act, what to do, what to say, what to admit, and what to hide. The same person would react completely different under a different context – for example, Jennifer's conversations with me when we first introduced on my second day and my later interview with her almost seem to be conversations with different people. Trey first approached me under the context of a newcomer, discussing his clay Buddha sculpture, which he was working on at the time, in a light and sparse form, sitting at work and speaking distantly. In my last session, he deeply conversed with me about how beautiful he found another meditation class at Rokpa. Standing next to me, he spoke his affection with his gestures, his proximity and his smile. Not just with dialogue.

My approach to context illustrates that the ethnographic data we work with is not value-free. Data is oriented and shaped by the identities we take up in the field and the identities we prescribe to others. The assumptions that Robert had on our first meeting differed from those in our final interview. His deliveries of sentences, implications, and expressions differed between each setting; his movements, body positions, and gestures differed between each setting; and our mutual understandings and correspondences were different because our identities had changed since we met. They were re-worked through language, and language in turn re-worked the identities we took up; for instance, from master/student to anthropologist/practitioner.

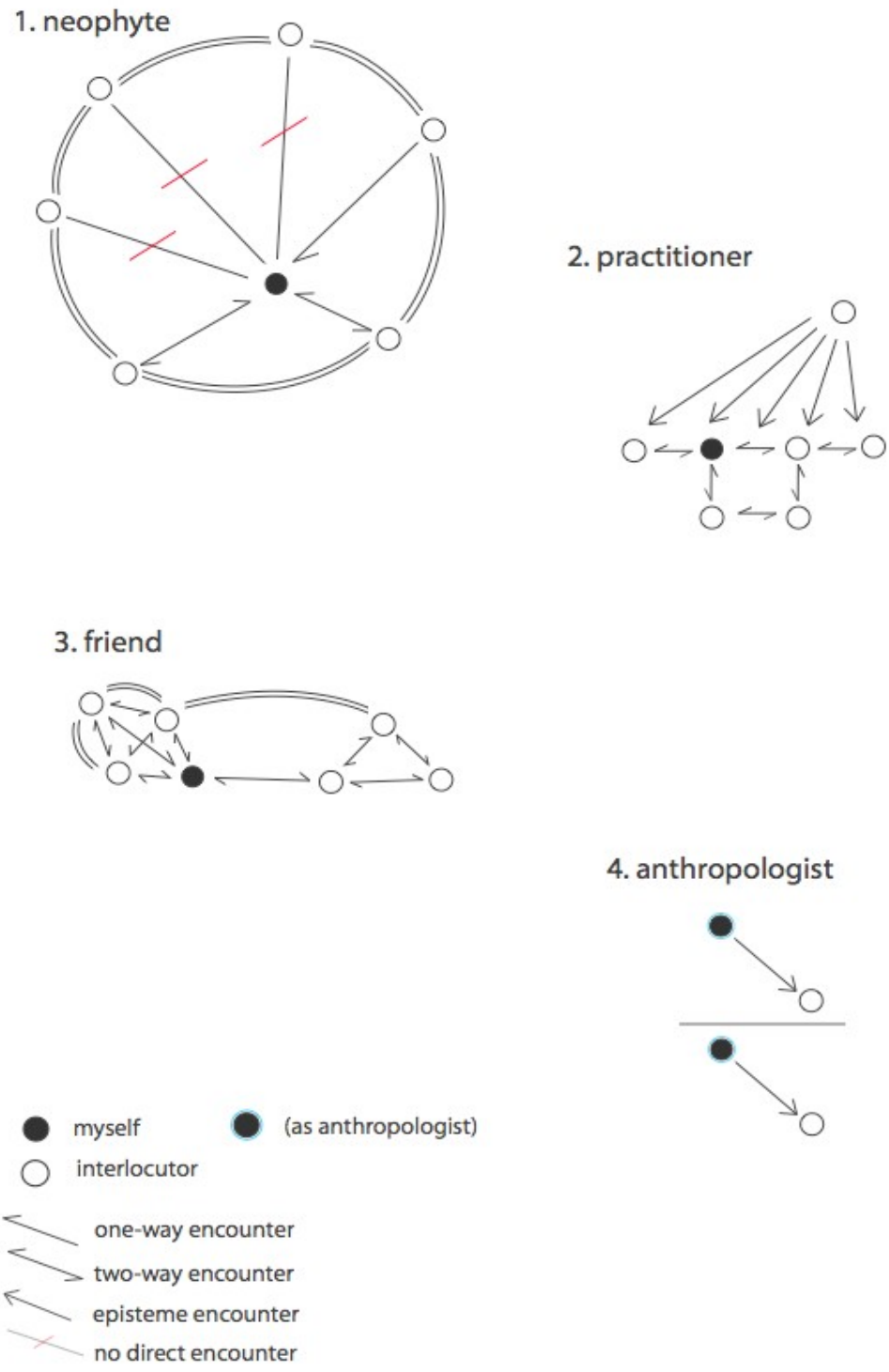
The fieldwork account

For the purposes of explication in this word limit, I have divided my fieldwork experience into four context stages, drawn out in diagrammatic form below: neophyte, practitioner, friend, and anthropologist. Each one of these diagrams, roughly sketched in my field notes, demonstrates the context I engaged in with my interlocutors, and how this context developed in my encounter. I will proceed by narrating the positionalities implied in each stage, and by evaluating data I received from each.

To clarify terms: by positionalities I refer to relations between individuals in a given context. Relations include physical spacing, exchanged dialogue, assumed identities (of the self and other), and situational assumptions (of how to act, what to say, etc). By one-way and two-way encounters,

I mean, respectively, one-directional dialogue (discussing about someone: *directional*) and two-directional dialogue (discussing between both people: *cooperative*). By episteme encounters, I refer to knowledge orientations. These are impositions of certain knowledges (a lecture, or anthropological interview) *over* a given context, a monocratic steering of context. The double-lines are background/general conversations that imply no specific small group but are all encompassing. None of these terms are separate from underlying context, but I highlight them here to emphasize the development of the fabric of context itself.

Of course I realize that this approach of using context is fabricated, but with such a limited space I am forced to delineate to such models to explain field dynamics. It is dangerous to over-simplify, but in an attempt to do justice to my fieldwork I am ethically obligated to demonstrate my process and development to the best of my ability, and this is what I attempt to do here.



1. Neophyte (day one)

As a neophyte, I felt unsure of how to exist and interact in the field. Upon my first arrival to the Rokpa Centre, I found the place hidden behind the old stone veneers of Reform Street. Students meandered down the street grabbing lunch, businessmen walked a faster pace, passing couples and families relaxing in the street cafés. I wandered until I found the address, and walked up to the second story where I met a stark yellow door. I went in, and the doorbell chimed. Nobody was in

the café, and I saw Robert in the meditation hall. I went and asked if I could help set up. He showed me everything to do, motioning towards the meditation pillows and pointing out where all of the seat placements and tables go. As I was setting up, the doorbell rang from the café. I thought that people would come join us, but nobody did. I finished, and stood around in the hall, thinking that we would conglomerate for meditation. It chimed once more. I began to get apprehensive, thinking I should change my plan and go in the other room. I did, and people had already conglomerated in various groups—I felt cut off. People stuck to the groups they'd formed, and there was no interest in forming larger cohesion outside of those groups.

I was equally a stranger to all of them. As evident in the diagram, I was distanced from these people who all had some relations with each other, but little to do with me. I had the closest two-way encounters with Matthew and Susan, where we talked at each other instead of cooperatively building conversation. This was the standard rote that all neophytes would present to practitioners: why they came, where they were from, and what they do. These basic questions are useful tools for extending context between neophytes and the established practitioners, opening it up to new interlocutors. But, this opening up is, at first, slow, tedious, mundane and distanced. My first day there with Robert was a one-way encounter, where he was interested *at* me for what my name was, how I was going to pay for the session, and when I would be back. My first impressions of Robert were like this. Everyday he took down people's names, took their money, and checked his schedule before we entered the meditation hall. It was like queuing at an amusement park: an official, bureaucratic procedure that I felt was rather directional. But I later found this was more because I was a neophyte, rather than it being a general observation. This was one of the first ways in which I realized that *the data that I was receiving through my interactions was tainted by positionalities in the field*.

2. Practitioner (day one / day two)

As a practitioner, I felt that my disconnected relationship to the group quickly began to wear off. From the end of the first day through my second session, this was my orientation to the group. The order of each meditation session went like this:

a) Arrival and setup (7:00-7:15): café
a) First meditation (7:15-7:40): meditation hall

a) Dharma talk (7:40-8:00): meditation hall
a) Tea break (8:00-8:20): café
a) Second meditation (8:20-8:55): meditation hall

My engrossing experiences in the dharma talks, the meditations, and the tea breaks began to integrate me as a practitioner, instead of a neophyte. The Dharma talks that Robert customarily gave oriented me as a solitary member of the meditation group. These talks were given by Robert in the meditation room, where we were oriented much like the above diagram: with the meditators in lines, facing him where he sat and spoke. This positioning gave him a kind of omnipotent power where he guided us through meditation. In the dharma talk he spoke to us Buddhist knowledge, history, and orthodoxy; at the start and close of every session he chanted to us Tibetan prayers (in Tibetan dialect). I diagram this organization with episteme encounter arrows, because he was engaging in a monocratic directing of context. We were the passive recipients (students), and he was the active knowledge-bearer (master). By acting out this relationship and enforcing this dichotomy, I became more of a coherent group member, by being forced into the group sitting around me in shared submission to the dharma talks.

More interestingly, I noted that by using language, fellow members engaged in strategies to navigate positionalities based on their spatial location. Since we meditators were sitting together in rows, facing the speaker, we had a sense of physical proximity that was forced upon us as well. This proximity inevitably led to small conversation, but it frequently faded out to awkward, tense silence in the first two days I was there. But, some people would engage with dialogue in such a way to shatter this tension and to negotiate our coherence as practitioners. The best example of this was on my first day, when Matthew cracked a joke during one of these silent periods about Robert while he was away. We were all sitting, ready to meditate, waiting on Robert to start the session, but we'd been waiting for five or six minutes alone in the hall. He spoke over the silence with Susan:

J. So I wonder what's going on here… [looking around the hall]
S: Yeah. We've been waiting more than a little while, haven't we?
J. I wonder if this is some kind of Buddhist trick… like something to test our patience or to see who will crack first… [everyone laughs]
[He is interrupted by a shuffling of curtains as Robert moves busily into the hall]
J. Ah well maybe not then in this case… [more hushed laughter as Robert

collects himself to sit]

This scenario counterpoised the silence and tension between us as practitioners by creating a hypothetical scenario of Buddhists as 'tricksters'—something that we all could relate to because we'd been waiting so long, the situation *could've* been a prank or a test. This sharing of context amongst practitioners was a distribution of communal, but only implied, knowledge that reified a sense of group solidarity through the joke. We all felt much more at-ease after this, as Robert sat to greet us for the session.

3. Friend (day three)

As a friend, my positionality in the group began to succumb to social orbits that I knew were occurring when I first arrived at the Centre. I fell into certain social clusters by engaging people that enjoyed being and talking with me. Three observations accompanied my change in positionality. First, before we had our first meditation session, I paid Robert as usual, ready to go into the meditation hall. But before we went in, he stopped me and caught me totally off-guard by asking how I'd been doing. We spoke of my academic work. Asked how my week had been. I said that it was going well, a bit busy as it was the last week of school before exams, but I told him I was happy to be here. This was the first time that he'd inquired about my ongoings outside of the standard neophyte rote and the payment process. On top of that, he inquired into my student life by mentioning on an aside that an anthropology professor from St Andrews used to come up for meditations, Dilley, apparently. But he no longer came. This direct exploration of my personal life was markedly different from our formal, distanced, or student-master, relationship before. It was a sign of growing friendship.

Second, during the tea break, Jennifer and Adam and I sat at a table to talk. We sat closely, and Jennifer asked Adam what first got him interested in Buddhism. He said that he studied it in school, etc, following the standard neophyte rote. But he delved into a complex story (which was shocking, as he hardly *ever* spoke to any of us in the session) about a boy in Tibet who meditated for six months without food or water, then disappeared. He was captivated with the tale in his rendition, as his expressions sprung alive and he leaned into the table to render his story. Jennifer and I weren't familiar with it, but it was a step in the direction of positionality shifts, where we were coalescing into a group of friends instead of just being fellow practitioners. His willingness to share

with us a very personal tale of his inspirations to meditate *beyond the standard rote* marked a different kind of positionality: one determined by intimate relations among smaller groups.

Third, Robert came to sit and join Jennifer and Adam and I with his steaming tea. As he was steeping it, we began talking about stories of Buddha. I mentioned Herman Hesse to Robert, asking if he'd heard of him. He said yes, and that he'd written *Siddartha*. Surprised, I continued to say that this was one of the first things that inspired me to become interested in Buddhist practice. He talked on this for a bit, then moved to discuss one of his favourite authors, Thich Nhat Hanh. This deep discussion far surpassed discussions I'd had with anyone as a practitioner. There were still general conversations amongst the whole practitioner group, but social dynamics were far more gravitated in smaller groups, as evidenced in the diagram. In these groups, talking about one's literary interests and life-inspirations was far off of the standard rote of normal dialogue. Amongst a small group of cohorts, we could share personal motivating stories, inspirational authors and have cooperative dialogue with mutual respect and shared interest. Not just being a meditator, but being a person, and a friend.

4. Anthropologist (post-fieldwork interviews)

As an anthropologist, I entered into a completely new positionality that had no previous comparison. This only occurred in two separate interviews with Robert and Jennifer. At every previous stage, I was a member of the community regardless of my depth of membership. But at this stage, I moved beyond conventional understandings of the community and embodied a positionality markedly different, as I was clearly interested in *studying* something. Rather than being subjected to positionalities of others, I was operating in a vacuum as the omnipotent questioner with my expressed anthropological knowledge. In the same way that Robert spoke the dharma talks in a monocratic steering of context, so to did I derail any alternate social scenarios for preference of *my* established form of communication. Although, as an anthropologist, it was an obvious two-way encounter, the diagram only demonstrates the episteme encounter as I wish to emphasize the odd dynamics of the scenario: a questioner who is asking very personal things to a subject who has little insight into anthropological practices, types of anthropological knowledge, and, perhaps most importantly, who has little insight into my intentions as an anthropologist. I will not repeat the interviews here, but I've presented samples from them in Appendices A and B.

Moment and process

This interview data was originally the focus of my project. Transcribed, it is eighteen pages of information. As an anthropologist, I sifted through it multiple times and found interesting themes that I could dwell on for this project. But in the end, I decided not to, for purely ethical reasons. No matter how interesting ethnographic conclusions are, it is one's experience in the field that takes chief importance. *This* is the meat of the encounters project, and *this* is my process of becoming the anthropologist and encountering a world through the ethnographic lens. If I've learned anything, I can say that Robert puts it best: 'being aware of the moment is a big thing about meditation, it's pretty much *the* thing.' Being aware of the moment in the encounter is a big thing about ethnography. It's pretty much *the* thing. While it's easy to think elsewhere—to theorize, to enforce our interpretations, to rationalize—the difficult, but most rewarding thing is to be *present in the process*. That's what I've tried to do here.

Supplements

In my aims to offer transparency in my fieldwork process, following are three appendices. Appendices A and B are sample transcriptions from private interviews in Dundee. Appendix C is a collection of sample pages from my journal to visually demonstrate my thoughts as I reflected on the field immediately after each session. [*Appendix C is unfortunately omitted from Ethnographic Encounters given space constraints – Ed.*]

Appendix A (Robert interview)

-[6:15] How does meditation interact with the ego? Or, how do you find it, I suppose?

R. I go to a group, for example, and sometimes you're meditating alone you think you're doing it a certain way and you like to sit in a certain way and you think, 'I'm doing a great thing' – you're more likely to behave in a more idiosyncratic way, or a more flamboyant way, like you're on a big trip. But if you're with other people, you're less likely to do that. You think about what they think of you. You're considering your behaviour, or you're considering your behaviour in terms of other people being there, so you're thinking less about yourself.

R. As far as the ego goes, I suppose any time you think of something you react to it. So, when you normally, your normal way of reacting to things, your normal habit of thinking either slightly

aggressive or a bit just like, trains of thoughts or patterns of thought you have which are either neurotic or not, if you're doing meditation usually the thoughts are coming up, but then you're trying to use meditation supports, like the posture the breathing, so, usually you're just aware of having thoughts you don't engage with. So, you have hopefully the same sort of reactions in your mind don't start to trigger as much. So the normal way that you react, you're always reacting because this is how you think *you* react, this is how you usually react, this is what makes you reacting this way, 'that's what I am'. So if you're not reacting in that way, then you're reducing your ego, hopefully.

-So meditation is a sort of state of non reaction? Because I still feel my thoughts flying around, they're not coherent. It's just a feeling of not reacting…?

R. Yeah, well they talk about non-judgmental awareness of thinking. So you have thoughts but you don't judge them as much. Because usually, you weigh thoughts up and think, 'is that a threat to me? Does that support me?' Like when you think of something. Or just anything that you become aware of, you say – 'is that a threat to me?' That's your ego. So, there's probably a lot more to it than that, but that's one aspect of it. But that's just my view of it!

-Do you think there's one way of being able to find the meditation state? Is it even possible to explain it in everyday talk?

R. Well, um, according to that thing that we were… I was reading the other night, the real dharma is supposed to be indescribable. But there's lots of things on mindfulness now which you can find in leaflets, lots of things you can read on the internet, or reference online. So I suppose it's your own personal experience! Nobody can really describe that because that's your personal experience. And that's a thing that will change for you through doing it. So I guess *that's* indescribable. Well it is fairly easy… mindfulness is quite easy to describe, I think. There's a lot of literature on it. I guess again it's like, you can describe it, but it doesn't make a difference unless you do it.

Appendix B (Jennifer Interview)

-[4:20] J. I was doing an art project about trances and rituals. I've always interested in Buddhism

because I learned about it in school.

-Where did you get the interest in trance from?

J. Well I was looking at…what we have to do is we always have to look at other artists' works and try to influence ourselves by that. And so I was looking at a lot of performance artists – a lot of them explore ritualistic things. They perform rituals in a different way, in a different setting, stuff like that. And so I thought about looking at rituals and I've always been interested in Buddhism, so I thought I…well I'd try that out!

-Did you meditate before you went?

J. I used to meditate a little bit, but never properly because…you know what the monk said about materialism or…spiritual materialism? I have actually read a lot of books about that recently. A lot of the stuff he talks about I already know. I know all about it and stuff but I've never actually done it and I know from reading about it that you can't just read about it, you have to do it.

-Do you feel more focused when you go here?

J. I do! But that's sort of because it gives me the incentive to actually do it! I don't really have the incentive to do it if I'm just sitting at home. Because I'll think about doing something else, like oh… I'll go…go see my friend, go do this. I don't really have the incentive to do it! Like, I'll want to do it, but I'll be like 'ah I can't do that… I can't do that on my own' sort of thing. It's quite…they're playing Bob Marley! I love Bob Marley! <laughs> <<Bob Marley begins playing on the restaurant sound system>>

-Do you meditate a lot?

J. Not really, no. I should. I wish I did. My form of meditation is listening to Bob Marley. <laughs> It's good! Yeah!

-So are you interested in Buddhism too, I guess?

J. Yeah! Always…from high school I did philosophy in high school, and we do first year uni stuff, if you get to that level, so that's what I did. And I also looked at Buddhism and I learned a lot about it in my fifth year as well. And I just think, when I learned about it, it was really good what the Buddha said – 'you don't… don't believe in it if it doesn't work for you. Try it out and then see! Don't just believe what I'm saying! Just go do it! Like, don't even listen to me! Honestly!' And I was just like… 'this guy is so cool!' It's like 'don't listen to me – just go do it! It works for me! If it works for you, that's cool, if it doesn't, that's cool, just don't hold me responsible!

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