



# **Preserving multiple identities in an interconnected world through non-attachment to identities: A self case-study of a Buddhist social worker**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, Dr.Huong Nguyen, taking herself as the case study, introduces us to the liberating power of non-attachment to identity, and how to “practice” non-attachment to identity in an ever increasing interconnected world. The researcher presents some of the identities that she transitions between in her daily life as well as presenting some solutions she has used in her own life. She hopes her case study can provide some insights to other people, especially young people who are increasingly exposed to the global world from a young age and contribute to the research in preserving identities in the interconnected world through non- attachment to identities.

*Keywords:* Multiple Identity, Non-attachment, Buddhist Social-worker.

## Introduction

The topic of this session is preserving cultural identity in an interconnected world. However, instead of writing an academic paper, I would like to humbly offer my own story as a case study of a person who had been adopting and negotiating multiple identities. Over the course of 40 years, I had transformed myself from an idealistic youth born and raised in Vietnam, to a social work professor teaching in the United States, to a Buddhist practitioner embracing Bodhisattva ideals, and finally, to the current state where I no longer adhere to any specific identity (Figure 1). Rather, I put them on and take them off like clothes, in order to help people better.



For a while, I struggled with these multiple identities and at times felt confused and frustrated. Take a simple example. When I took American students on a study-abroad course in Vietnam, I was constantly confronted with a question: “Who am I? A Vietnamese or an American?” Am I going to talk to my students about domestic violence in Vietnam with insights of a person who was born and raised in Vietnam or am I going to approach it with the critical eye of an outside scholar? When I took students to my parents’ house in Hanoi to help them learn about an actual Vietnamese family, sitting in the living room to translate for my parents and students, sometimes I caught myself totally confused about whether I was a daughter to my Mom and Dad or a professor to my students. Whatever identity I took on, I must be mindful of rules, norms, expectations, and punishments associated with that identity.

In nearly 20 years of walking the line as a multiple-identity person, it was never easy; however, it did get easier recently after I started to embrace and embody the Buddhist concept of non-attachment to self, identity, and largely all forms and labels.

Essentially, my answer to the issue of preserving cultural identity in an interconnected world is to *not be concerned about preserving the identity*, so that one can be free from the borders of any identity and can use identities in any way that would best support the world. In other words, *my solution to preserving identity is not to attach to any identity*. Toward the question, “Who are you in this world?” one can on the outside reply with various answers, such as “I am Vietnamese,” “I am a Vietnamese American,” “I am a social work professor,” or “I am a Buddhist.” However, inside, there is only one answer: “I am nothing.”

In this paper, taking myself as a case study, I would like to discuss the liberating power of non-attachment to identity, and how to “practice” non-attachment to identity. I hope my case study can provide some insights to other people, especially young people who are increasingly exposed to the global world from a young age. But first, allow me now to explain a bit about my journey to reach this answer.

## **Identity #1: The idealistic helper**

I was born and raised in a small town in North Vietnam after the Vietnam War, when 70% of Vietnamese people were living in poverty, millions were disabled, and the country was still lacking necessities like clean water, food, and electricity (Phong, 2008; Dollar & Litvack, 1998; SarDesai, 1998). My mother worked at the city library; thus, I spent my childhood reading many Russian, French, British, and classic Chinese novels, ranging from French romantic novels like Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* to Russian realist works such as Maxim Gorky’s *The Mother*. Through them, I formed a vision about a bright, happy world in which people would treat each other with love, respect, and equality. I vaguely wanted a personal and professional life that centered around two words: *help people*.

However, in the mid-1990s, when I was taking the national entrance exam into college, I had very few options for my desired career in “helping people” since concepts like “social work” did not even exist in Vietnam then. Seeing that the country was fast integrating into the world economy and that globalization was an important agent of change in Vietnam, I decided to major in foreign trade economics, hoping that learning to improve the economy would help solving many problems for Vietnam. During my time in college in Hanoi, I started volunteering for international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and was exposed to

concepts like community development and social administration as areas of expertise that one could pursue as a career. I also started writing simple op-ed articles describing social issues such as corporal punishment of children, wife beating, and the hard life of farmers. Intuitively, I believed that help must be offered to people in multiple ways: to the stomach, to the body, and to the mind.

After graduating from college, I applied for graduate study in the United States and started my doctoral education at the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration, not knowing that I was entering a social work program. I had decided to go to Chicago because I was attracted by the term "social service administration," which I had envisioned as leading to a career with NGOs. Needless to say, I was very confused during my first semester at Chicago when I kept hearing my professors and classmates use the term *social work* in class. When I graduated from Chicago, I became the first person in post-war Vietnam to have a doctoral degree in social work. However, I had indeed stumbled into social work, following my idealistic intuition and that central word: *help*.

## **Identity #2: The professional social worker**

So now, from an idealistic helper influenced by romantic fiction, I quickly embraced a new identity as a professional helper or a "social worker." For people who are not familiar with this concept, in the United States, social workers are those who are professionally trained at accredited programs, often at the master's level, and pass exams to get licensed to practice, much like nurses, lawyers, or doctors. They work in hospitals, schools, prisons, court rooms, nursing homes, and many settings to help individuals, families, and communities face difficult problems such as poverty, disability, mental health, addiction, child abuse, sexual assault, teen pregnancy, trauma, violence, etc.

For a while, I wholeheartedly embraced my identity as a social worker and had a clear vision about my personal and professional life. I envisioned that I would finish my doctoral degree, become an assistant professor in social work, and then I would get tenure and become associate professor, then eventually full professor. I would conduct research, thus developing my own theory and intervention to help people. I would train social work students. I would help Vietnam develop the social work profession. I would publish books in Vietnam and the United States for both academic and general audience. Basically, I aimed to become a successful and kind social work scholar who would be involved in many areas in order to help people. Along the way, I would travel the world to learn about life and people. And of course, I would be happily married too. All in all, it was a typical dream of a young aspiring intellectual.

I did do many of the items on the above list. I finished my PhD and became an assistant professor. I supported Vietnamese universities to develop social work training programs. I conducted research and published scientific articles. I also did non-traditional social work activities, such as publishing novels, short stories, and non-fiction books to introduce social work concepts to the general public. At least for a while, I was following the path.

### **Identity #3: The Buddhist practitioner with Bodhisattva's ideals**

Suddenly, all of my vision for a life as a social work scholar changed.

One, I had been married but wasn't happy. I could not really blame anyone for my unhappy marriage. Looking back, I could only say that both my ex-husband and I were not meant to be married and not to each other. Nonetheless, we got married and we got divorced. We had a very easy divorce, but it still left me with deep sadness and confusion. For about two years around the divorce, I cried almost every day even though I would look very normal on the outside. I didn't tell anyone about the pain I had inside.

One night in late 2010, not long after our divorce, I had an incident that I could only, at that time, describe in two ways: (1) I encountered a ghost or (2) I was developing hallucinations, meaning I was becoming mentally ill. Basically, I woke up one night for no reason and heard "something" breathing next to me. Loud, clear, heavy, and sad breathing, like someone with asthma. I didn't see anything, but the breathing was very clear. In and out... In and out... In my head, I envisioned a half-human, half-animal creature with a lot of black hair all over its body. Terrified to the point of near mental breakdown, I used all kinds of scientific explanations to explain it away. Perhaps a cat in the room? Perhaps a huge rat? Perhaps noise from the fridge? Perhaps it was just my own breathing being circulated in the room? Perhaps I was having a dream. Perhaps... None of that provided any relief because deep down inside, my mind quietly and firmly said "No, that was not it."

So I took a pillow to throw at "that thing." The breathing stopped. Just when I thought the breathing was simply a bad dream, I heard it again. Only this time, it came from the other side of the room; as if the beast had moved after I threw the pillow at it. It was watching me and breathing again. In and out. In and out.

I really was about to lose my mind and go crazy from fear. Facing death in a literal way, I thought I had to appeal to some higher power to save me from this unknown beast. But I never believed in or prayed to any God or Buddha or anything. What would I do?

Eventually, I vaguely remembered that my mother had had my horoscopes read when I was a child. The psychic reader said that my protector was Guanyin Bodhisattva or the Goddess of Compassion. I then remembered further that the mantra of Guanyin Bodhisattva was *Om ma ni pad me hum*. So that night, for the first time in my life, I chanted silently but fiercely in my head that mantra:

*“Om ma ni pad me hum, om ma ni pad me hum, om ma ni pad me hum...”*

I wasn't sure if I was chanting it right but I chanted with all my heart and at some point I passed out, from fear and exhaustion.

For two years after that night, I was living in hell, day and night. I was terrified with the constant idea that there were terrible ghosts following and watching over me all the time, ready to murder me. I had no idea why they followed me and what they wanted from me. I had grown up in a culture where ghosts were associated with really bad scary and evil things; thus I was always on the defense. I was scared of taking showers. I would avoid dark and quiet places. I had to have the light on when I slept. Every day, I was so frightened when the sun went down and I was so happy when the sun came up. Each night, my sleep was tortured. I would close my eyes and immediately flashed back to the breathing. I saw myself alone in infinite darkness, surrounded by millions of invisible black hairy beasts. I would feel choked and seized by fear and I would open my eyes, gasping for air. This process would repeat all night. Every night, I felt that I was being dragged down to hell to enter battles with these invisible evils; and every morning I would drag my fully wounded body out of the battlefields to enter the day-time battlefield, which was work. The world had never been so dark and so miserable. Yet, nobody knew because I didn't tell anyone. Not my family. Not my friends. Not my colleagues. On the outside, I was still productive and upbeat. I was a social worker trained to help people but I didn't seek help for myself.

This perspective gave me deep sympathy for everyone who ever suffered from mental health problems, whether depression, anxiety disorder, PTSD, schizophrenia, or anything. I knew what people felt after they had gone through a traumatic experience, whether rape, assault, traffic accident, stroke, war, or violence.

Being trained as a scientist, I simply could not leave things unresolved like that. More importantly, I could not let my life proceed in this fear and potentially end by this fear. It was a matter of life and death. I had to find out “the truth” about that night. What had happened? Was there really a ghost? Or was I just going crazy? How to end this endless nightmare?

These questions started my journey back to Vietnam after being away for 10 years to enter Buddhist temples for the first time in my life to learn about the mind. For the next 6 years, I conducted three interconnected projects: one about services offered at Buddhist temples for people with mental health problems, and two about mental health services in Vietnam. Because of these projects, I stayed full-time in Buddhist temples in Vietnam, Thailand, India, Japan, Korea, and the United States for extended periods of time ranging from 2 weeks to 3 months at a time. Every day, I would wake up before 4am to gather with the monks for the morning mass; then during the day, I would follow their activities, participating in all temple rituals, and interviewing monks and temple visitors. At the temple, I witnessed so many incidents about “ghosts” and beings from other realms of existence, most of them came to seek help but were often mistaken as coming to torture people. I also witnessed many incidents about “holy beings,” who showed immense compassion and wisdom that I had never encountered before. I observed many cases of Vietnamese people brought to the temples with diagnoses of severe schizophrenia, depression, or simply madness, and were cured. I was lucky to meet many great teachers and masters who provided me with guidance about Buddhism. I read the sutras and contemplated them every day: *Diamond Sutras*, *The Platform Sutra by the Sixth Patriarch*, *The Vimirlakirti Sutras*, *The Sutra of the Amitabha Buddha*, *The Heart Sutra*, etc.

All of a sudden, Buddhism became the absolute center of my personal and professional life. Nothing else was more important. Personally, I wanted to end the misery I was in, which was mostly fear. Professionally, I wanted to learn and develop Buddhist-inspired therapy to help people end suffering from mental problems similar to mine, such as depression, anxiety, fear, anger, and PTSD.

In 2012, while still conducting research, I decided to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, officially becoming a Buddhist. One year later, I took the 48 Bodhisattva’s vows. So now, my initial concept about “helping” expanded far beyond its traditional conceptualization in social work. My identity as a professional social worker also expanded to unprecedented dimensions. I could summarize these identity changes in this simple table:

	<i>Professional social worker</i>	<i>Buddhist social worker with Bodhisattva's ideals</i>
<i>Who to help?</i>	Human beings in need of social work services.	Humans and non-beings in all realms of existence, without discrimination.
<i>What to help with?</i>	Many social and health problems, most notably poverty, sickness, disability, mental disorders, addiction, violence, crime, discrimination, etc.	Any form of suffering, which can be manifested and labeled as separate issues but are essentially one issue: illusion about inside and outside phenomena.
<i>How to help?</i>	Use social work skills, knowledge, and values to engage with clients, assess clients, develop an intervention for clients, and assess the intervention results. Use best practices and evidence in social work.	Go to the root of all suffering: attachment to inside and outside phenomena due to illusions about them being real and could be taken, maintained, controlled, or attained.
<i>End goal of help?</i>	Help clients to rid themselves of current problems and prevent future problems.	End all suffering for beings in all forms at the root. Liberation and enlightenment to all beings.
<i>The helper</i>	As <i>container</i> of social work skills, knowledge, and values; and as practitioner who only offers services within their trained expertise and license.	As Bodhisattva whose life centered around giving unlimitedly, thus having liberating power to take on any problems for beings.

For a while, I was sure about my concrete and very dignified identity: the Buddhist practitioner and Buddhist social worker performing Bodhisattva's ideals in the real world. I thought that was it: my true identity in this world that I had finally found.

And then, all of it changed—again.



## **And now: I am not anything**

During the summer of 2016, I followed a friend to a temple named Rombodhidharma in Loei, Thailand. I had always had an interest in Thai Buddhism after I read Ajahn Chah's books, which had saved me multiple times during the two years of living in hell. So I had thought that I would go there to learn meditation in the Thai tradition.

When I got to the temple, however, there was no meditation, no chanting, no reciting the sutras, no mantras. Nothing. The temple was in the mountains. Its Buddha Hall was simply an open cement floor covered with palm leaves and no walls. No decorations. No donation boxes. No incense. No recitation handbooks. No chain of beads. Nothing. More than 300 monastics lived in simple huts and houses. Electricity was produced by solar cells. Trash was sorted and burned naturally. It was such a simple, self-sufficient community. At 6am every morning, monastics and lay people gathered in the Buddha Hall to listen to the dharma talks by Luang Por Phosri Suriya Khemarato. He did not preach any standard sutras. He said:

*“Wake up!”*

*“No body, no mind, no everything.”*

*“No inside, no outside, no Nirvana... Nirvana was not any state, it was not anything.”*

*“Relate to everything as Nothing to Nothing, Extinction to Extinction, Nirodh to Nirodh.”*

It is not my intention to discuss Luang Por's teachings here. However, I would like to share a little bit about my experiences in the last two years after I started coming to Rombodhidharma temple. Let me talk about one incident at the temple.

One day in October 2016, a senior monk at Rombodhi-dharma temple told me:

- Huong, shave your head and ordain, even just for a few days.
- Oh no, I can't.
- Why not?
- I already ordained in my heart.
- Ordain on your body too. It will be good for you.
- Oh no, I can't.
- Why not?
- Because...

I listed my good reasons. One, in a week or so, I would have to go to Vietnam for a meeting with the Prime Minister. Two, I was going to go to Hanoi to present to the Vietnamese government about developing the Social Work Law for Vietnam. This was a very important law and nobody would take me seriously if they saw me with a shaved head. Three, I was still a professor in America—what would the university and students think about me with my shaved head? Four, five, six...

The senior monk listened to me, smiling, shaking his head:

- Ah, the doctors, they always have so many reasons. I have met many of them. They always say, “No need to ordain in the body, only ordain in the heart.” Ah, same all the time...

In that moment, when I listened to him, I saw through all the identities that I had built and attached to as the real “me”; I had been protecting them, promoting them, advertising them, and carrying them around like heavy suits. I saw all the fears lying at the root of my refusal to simply cut off some hair.

One, I was scared of potentially being fired from work at the university. I would lose my job, my salary, my colleagues, and all my networks. That was my attachment to the importance and pride of being a professor. But “professor” was just an empty title. When I got lost at night, “professor” meant nothing.

Two, I was somehow vaguely scared of being kicked out of America and I had waited many years to become an American citizen. That was about my being attached to the title “an American.” But “American” was just a word. The mind truly had no citizenship. Being “an American” meant nothing.

Three, I was scared of being frowned upon by my readers who had been following me; some even considered me their “idols” because few Vietnamese women had a doctoral degree and had become a professor in the United States like I did. If I shaved my head now, they would think that I was losing my mind. That was my attachment to being a “best-selling author.” But, again, “author” and “idols” were just empty words; it had nothing to do with whether I was truly able to use my words to liberate people. It was just me giving myself too much importance.

Four, I was scared that my family would disapprove and especially that my Mom would have a heart attack. That was my attachment to being a daughter and family member. But, again, much as I loved my Mom, I was completely separate from her in the sense that I could not experience her headache on her behalf, nor could she carry my fears of darkness

and death for me. What we had for one another was only the *idea* about being daughter and mother and its accompanying obligations and expectations.

Five, I was scared of looking ugly and not womanly if I shaved my head. That was about my holding on to the concept of myself as a woman. But so what if I looked “not womanly”? “Woman” was just a word to denote this empty body.

Six, I was scared of not shaving my head for the first time in Vietnam, with a Vietnamese monk, thus disrespecting my cultural roots. That was my attachment to being a Vietnamese. Again, “Vietnamese” was just a narrow title I confined myself to while this body and mind originally knew no boundaries and citizenship.

Seven, I was scared that if I let myself be “pressured” into shaving my head out of respect for a monk, what would I be “pressured” into next? Maybe I would be pressured to abandon my life to become a full-time Buddhist nun? Really? I would forsake my good life and become a nun? That really challenged my pride about being a Buddhist. And “being a Buddhist practitioner” was just a title that I had decorated myself with and confined myself to while, truly, the Buddha talked about liberation from *all*.

And eight...

Nine...

Ten...

In a split second, I saw all of the labels, titles, concepts, identities, etc. that I had put on myself over the years as ME. They were simply empty, void of meaning and substance and significance. Just nothing. They had always been nothing, just arbitrary labels temporarily used to decorate the constantly changing body, which could not be called anything either. All phenomena were empty. Mind, body, everything.

And so, I said to the senior monk, “Yes, please shave my head.”

## **The liberating power of non-attachment to identities**

After that experience, identities became more like the clothes that I could put on and take off in certain social settings. Inside the clothes, however, I did not have a fixed sense of myself as anything. With this liberation, it became natural to embrace different identities without feeling conflicted. I could move fluidly from one to another, be content with any identity that people give me. I did not feel the pressure of having to protect any identity as “me.” I used identities as a means to support people, rather than as real and fixed labels.

If my identity as a professor helped to connect American universities with Vietnamese universities to develop training programs in social work, then I was a professor and nothing.

If my identity as an author helped me to reach young people who read my books and want to learn more about how to build a meaningful life, then I was an author and nothing.

If my identity as a divorced woman helped me to connect with other divorced women to empower them, then I was a divorced woman and nothing.

If my combined identity as a professor and Buddhist practitioner could help some researchers be aware of their biases toward Buddhist practices, religion, and/or scientism, I would reveal the combined identity. But if it were likely to go the opposite way, I would stay silent.

Many times, I started with one identity and then revealed other identities in order to make deeper connections with people I had contact with. A clear example is the class-room setting. Most of the students who took *Introduction to Social Work* at the University of South Carolina entered my course with the vague assumption that I had an Asian origin. On the first day of class, I would only talk to them about my education and my cultural background... that indeed I was originally from Vietnam. As the semester went on and we built a trusting classroom environment, I would tell them about other identities when we discussed different course topics. For example, when we talked about social work in mental health, I would talk to them about my experience studying mental disorders at Buddhist temples and how a Buddhism-inspired social worker would approach “mental disorders” differently from a traditional social worker. When we talked about social work with the aging population, I would tell them that I already envisioned myself returning to a temple in my old age and one day I would sit down and stop breathing and leave the world. I would tell them that death was not the scary end that society had made it into. The response from students was often, “Aha!” They never thought death could be so simple. By the end of the semester, when we reviewed the course and talked about a career in social work, I would then be able to tell my students that they should not limit themselves with the title of a “professional social worker” who specialized in a specific area of practice (schools, hospitals, community); rather, they should let go of all narrow labels and identities to be a boundless social worker who had the power to liberate people and end all suffering for them. That is, I would tell them about the non-attachment nature of everything, about Bodhisattva’s ideals, and how they could tap into the power of being NOTHING.

## How to be non-attached to identity?

My students have asked me this question a lot, “How can we practice to achieve non-attachment to identity?” First of all, I have felt reluctant to use the word “practice” because I did not want to give the idea that there was indeed a standard protocol to follow in order to get to non-attachment as a desirable static state. It would be paradoxical to think of non-attachment as a desirable state since then you were being attached to non-attachment. This was the place where words became very limiting. I also did not want to give the wrong idea that I had answers to everything. I was and am still learning myself. However, in my experiences, I have been going through two phases of “practicing” non-attachment to identities.

### *Phase 1: Changing bad habits to good habits*

When I first came to Buddhism and learned about the concept of “karma,” I realized that everything about me—the way I looked, formed my thoughts, talked, sat, slept, ate, traveled, selected my career, liked, and disliked, etc.—was a habit. I was just a collection of habits, habits, and habits—habits of the body and habits of the mind. “Karma” was essentially habits, some heavy and some light, some good and some bad. In the first year after learning about Buddhism, I was terrified to realize the many layers of habitual thoughts, speeches, and actions and how I was totally controlled by habits, which was why I was totally helpless toward my fears, anger, loneliness, greed, and all other problems. The mother of all habits was the tendency to collect everything outside and inside for me—to build myself as a person with more money, more experiences, more degrees, more knowledge, more skills, more titles, more positions, more importance, and more, more, more of everything. I also saw that most people around me were similarly controlled by their own and others’ mental and bodily habits. Our habits got so thick and so heavy that carrying them around made us exhausted, unhappy, and cruel. So I made a point about changing all bad habits to good habits.

My “practice” at this stage consisted of three key things. One, I reviewed my life from my first memory until now, and I asked for forgiveness for all the wrong things I did in the past that I could remember—killing animals, stealing, lying, etc. Every day I bowed in front of the Buddha’s altar as if I were kneeling at the feet of not only the Buddhas but all beings, from ants, snakes, mosquitoes to mothers, fathers, ex-husbands, people I liked and people I disliked, and I humbly asked to be forgiven for everything that I had done wrong toward them. One time at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in California, built by the late master Hsian Hua, I did the bowing and I felt like different groups of beings just appeared one by one in my mind for their turn to resolve everything with me. Tears just flowed down my eyes.

In addition to the bowing and asking for forgiveness twice a day, I would review and watch out for all my activities during the day, from the moment I woke up to the time I went to bed. I saw the habits of my eyes when they came into contact with sights, my ears when they came into contact with sounds, my nose with smells, my tongue with tastes, my body with touch, and my thoughts. Throughout the day, I practiced “catching” myself any moment I saw that I was following a habitual thought, utterance, or behavior. I made a mental note, “Ah, that again” and promised myself I would not do it again. In the beginning, I could only catch myself when I was already following the habit and suffered from it; later, I would be able to catch myself before it took form and I would be able to cancel it before it became a force that I needed to fight against. Over time, I stopped “catching.” I just let them be without engaging in them. Later, at Rombodhidharma Temple, I would learn to use the word “Ahosi!” when I bowed or silently said “Ahosi” into the habitual force whenever I caught myself following bad habits. It was like taking the wood out of a burning fire. The heat would lessen. Over time, bad habitual thoughts, speeches, and actions seemed to automatically stop before they were formed.

Finally, I realized that the environment around me had habitual energy too. Pictures, furniture, and souvenirs that I had kept with me from Vietnam to Chicago to South Carolina could easily pull me back to sad days in Chicago or happy days in my childhood. They also made me build and reinforce an increasingly solid story about my life, my characteristics, my style, my possessions, my everything. When I looked around, I saw that across the world, our houses, office buildings, and lands also carried habitual energy that would make us awake or sleepy, elevated or sinking, angry or calm. So, I also learned to clear my living and working environment, so that I was surrounded by only simple and necessary things instead of the abundance of decorations and stuff with multiple colors, shapes, feelings, thoughts, etc.

### ***Phase 2: Changing good habits to no habits to non-attachment***

After some time, I stopped emphasizing good habits. I was not emphasizing or focusing on anything. At this stage, I did not give labels and meanings to inside and outside phenomena. At Rombodhidharma Temple, I learned about “Relating to everything as Nothing to Nothing.” I did not need to call everything outside as trees, building, chairs, or everything inside as angry, sad, happy. I did not label “good” and “bad” to what was happening and did not engage with them. I felt as if after my six senses—eyes, ears, nose, mouth, body, and mind—were “cleansed” during the first phase, they just became open. When I walked around, the senses could come into contact with sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, and mental formations but they were not following these appearances. They remained open and

clear like a clean mirror where everything could reflect its image but the mirror itself didn't treat any reflection as real entities and did not hold anything in it. The mirror also needed not to think of itself as a mirror. In this way, everything happened and ended when it happened. I did not keep anything and I could flow from one activity to the next. Sitting, lying, standing, walking, eating, teaching, watching TV,... I did all of them in this flow. From inside the flow, a liberating emptiness energy radiated out. At Rombodhidharma Temple, I learned to share this emptiness energy with all.

The more I shared the empty energy around, the more it became that inside and outside were already all pure and liberated. Everything was already Nirvana and everything was non-attached in itself. It was pure body and mind directly with everything also pure. I learned to use the power from this all-pure power to help. Insights and wisdom automatically came when I operated with this non-attachment power. And this is the part where I am still learning.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, through my case study, I have discussed preserving identities in the interconnected world through non-attachment to identities. I am sure what I am saying here is not new to the honorable ordained audience. However, by sharing these experiences as a lay person who had been struggling with problems that used to be very real and painful to me, I am hoping that it will be somewhat helpful to other lay people, especially young people, who are searching to find out who they really are. In this increasingly connected world, the struggle with manufactured identities born out of being members of endless Internet groups became very real and potentially schizophrenic or disabling to some. I hope my message about non-attachment to identities and its liberating power can be relevant to people. Even though I am still learning a lot about it myself, I know it has helped me a great deal.

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