(1) Religious Practice in Home Country

During a regular day in their home country (Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, India, Tibet) Buddhist monks are occupied with cleaning the temple grounds, reciting sutras, chanting, alms collecting, prayers and offerings, learning or teaching in school, reading, meditating, discussing and memorising. On special days, when the temple is crowded with people because of a holiday or religious festivities, the monks perform ceremonies, guided meditations or chantings together with the lay people. Occasionally the monks leave the temple grounds when a family calls for ceremonies connected to birth, marriage, death or other rite de passage.

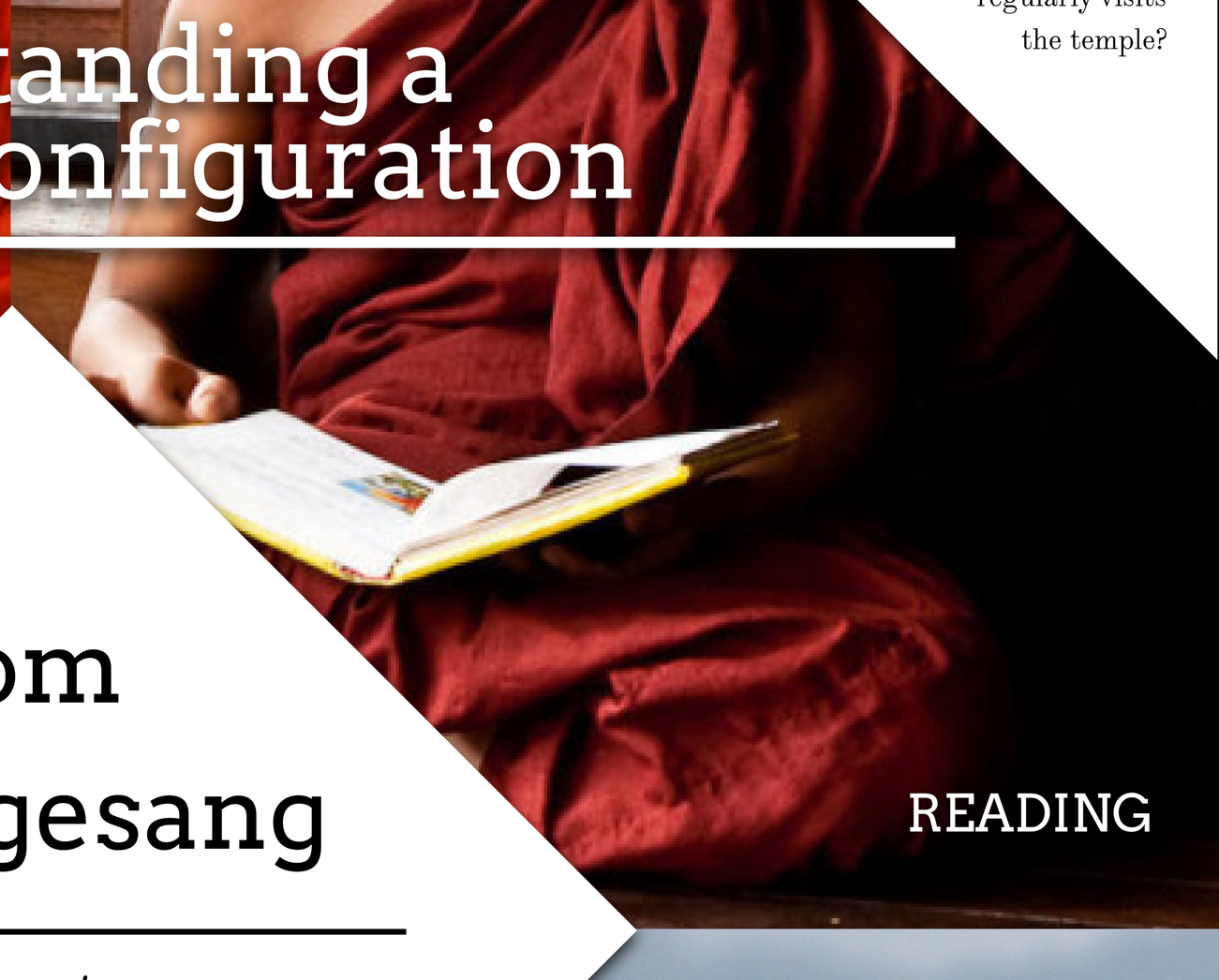
How do the monks change their practices after migrating to Berlin, Germany?

(2) Transformation to Protestant Buddhism

After moving to Berlin the monks alter their daily routine. Some approach a German mode of practice, although they acknowledge that the German religious practice is insufficient. Focussing on meditation and textual studies this mode of practice originated in the early phase of perception of Buddhism in Germany in the 19th century and was shaped in consistency with Protestant religious values such as salvation through self-discipline and a religion freed from ceremonies, rituals etc. So when the monks have more «free time» they reduce their practice to meditation and reading.

Do the monks transform their practice when an Asian community regularly visits the temple?

Understanding a Buddhist Configuration



Tom Vogelgesang

GÖTTINGEN SPIRIT SUMMER SCHOOL

CETREN Transregional Research Network

DORISEA Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia

GEORG-AUGUST-UNIVERSITÄT GÖTTINGEN

For more information, references and audio snippets of the interviews, please visit the website of the research project:

ubc.tom-vogelgesang.de

(3) The Agency of the Community

Some Buddhist monks in Berlin are not approaching a Protestant mode of practice but retain the daily routine of their home country. This is due to the dependency on alms for the monks and the exchange of merit for the laity. The monks in those Berlin temples that are frequented to 95 percent by an Asian community (Thai or Vietnamese) preserve the variety in their religious practices. Thus the lay people have great influence on the monks' practice. In return for their donations of food, money, clothes etc. they receive blessings for departed family members, take part in sermons and chant sutras together with the monks before lunch.
Without the Asian community and their demands the religious practice of Buddhist monks in Berlin follows a different path.

(4) Theory & Methodology

Implying that there is no such thing as a pure, clearly definable religion, this study argues that the presented Buddhist configuration can only be understood when the phenomenon itself is seen as a form of hybridisation — as a changing configuration dependent on place, time, several agents and their interaction with society.
The study relates its findings to the history of Buddhist perception in Germany, key concepts of european modernity and modern Buddhist configurations in South and Southeast Asia. It is based on participant observations in eight Buddhist temples in Berlin and ten qualitative interviews with monks and nuns from Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Sri Lanka and Tibet.