Thanks to the generous support of the Scott Kloeck-Jenson Summer Travel Grant, I spent nearly three months this past summer completing preliminary research on the history of socially engaged Buddhism in Thailand. My project aims to understand how and why socially engaged Buddhism in Thailand arose, while uncovering and exploring its main lines of religious and non-religious influence. Socially engaged Buddhism (or engaged Buddhism), broadly defined, refers to a now global movement of Buddhist practitioners who place significant emphasis on non-violent engagement with social issues in various ways including political and environmental activism, charity work, conflict resolution and education as a means of alleviating the suffering of others. These Buddhists contrast the Buddhism they are practicing with other, popular forms of Buddhist expression that place less prominence on the engagement with and restructuring of society for the purpose of mitigating collective suffering.

Going into the summer, my initial thematic focus was on engaged Buddhist development—both internal and external—and the ways in which they interrelate and are shaped through socially engaged Buddhist practice. This period of early fieldwork helped to narrow and shift my project more towards seeing engaged Buddhism through terms of religious pluralism. In this case, the pluralism I witnessed refers to the different ways Buddhist and non-Buddhist groups and individuals interact, engage in dialogue, and influence each other while maintaining their own religious commitments in the process of larger discourses of engaged Buddhism. Moreover, I now see Thai socially engaged Buddhism not as a single unified strand or school of Buddhism, but as a divergent set of organizations and individuals with diverse and sometimes even competing histories, views and aims that shape a larger contemporary societal discourse lumped together under the umbrella term "engaged Buddhism."

This period of pre-dissertation research also deepened my understanding of the various streams of ideas that have helped shape Thai socially engaged Buddhism. These include critical theory and Marxism, democracy, human rights, environmentalism, social justice, equality, and women’s rights. The influence of Tibetan and Vietnamese Mahayana traditions as well as values and practices of peacebuilding associated with Quakerism have also had an impact on the development of the movement.

The research I completed over the summer allowed me to gauge the viability of my proposed project, make a number of important initial contacts with research subjects, and locate potential study sites. I began my research trip at the Buddhadāsa Indapanno archives (BIA) in Bangkok, home to thousands of teachings, writings, and recordings of Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu in Thai (and other languages) including works on Buddhism, politics, activism and social change that have been influential for many Thai engaged Buddhists. While there, I was able to find a series of relevant documents relating to my research including a number of writings on Buddhism and politics and ‘Dhammic Socialism,’ Buddhadāsa’s vision for re-shaping society along Buddhist lines. These documents will likely be central for understanding Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu’s pioneering and foundational role in the socially engaged Buddhist Movement.
During the summer, I also developed professional relationships with socially engaged Buddhist leaders Sulak Sivaraksa and Somboon Chungprampree at the headquarters of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) and the Spirit in Education Movement (SEM) in Bangkok. These organizations are two of the most significant and influential groups related to engaged Buddhism in Thailand. They employ a number of individuals central to the movement who are conducting trainings and workshops on a variety of topics such as non-violent communication, peace building, hospice care and sustainable development. These organizations and the sites they operate will be rich sources for interviews and for obtaining oral histories during participant observation. Sulak and Somboon introduced me to a number of formative individuals in the movement – connections that will be important for future research. Through these contacts, I met with a range of socially engaged Buddhists in various Thai locales. I took trips to Chiang Mai and areas of central Thailand, and spoke with these practitioners about their work and the history of the movement. During this early research, there emerged a trend among many interviewees regarding the significance and impact of Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu and Sulak Sivaraksa’s thought on their own work and on the development of Thai engaged Buddhism. These accounts reinforced the worth of further exploring the role these two leaders had on the movement and on the organizations they created and are associated.

Thai engaged Buddhism has a fairly strong history and relationship with Vietnamese Buddhism, especially with Thich Nhat Hanh’s group. This stream of influence is a critical component of the movement’s development as it has shaped the thought of Sulak Sivaraksa and the International Network of Engaged Buddhists in various ways. While in Thailand, I visited and stayed at the Thich Nhat Hanh led Thai Plum Village monastic community in Nakhon Ratchasima. This community houses more than a hundred and fifty Vietnamese monks and nuns. Visitors are welcome to stay for periods of time and carry out a daily schedule similar to the monastic one. While residing with the community, I was able to forge connections with some of the monks, nuns and employees there and learn more about the community including how it took root in Thailand. A number of the ordained members I spoke with held nuanced understandings of engaged Buddhist history and practice and will likely be valuable future sources.

In conclusion, I would like to express my gratitude to the Jenson family, Global Studies at UW-Madison, and the various organizations and people I met with over the summer. This opportunity for pre-dissertation research was a remarkably advantageous experience that will position me well for the upcoming dissertation project and fieldwork. As a result of the fellowship and research time spent, my project is now more focused. Furthermore, the building of personal and organizational ties, such as with BIA, INEB, and SEM will be of great value to future research.