

# Truth Is Within

Just Another Buddhist Monk's Weblog

Home



Thursday, December 05, 2013

## Cultural Buddhism

Yet another post on culture. Last one for a while, hopefully.

Buddhist culture is really wonderful; by which is meant the cultural norms established by the Buddha himself - keeping precepts and holy days (days for trying to be especially holy), sitting cross-legged at the roots of trees, reciting recollections and memorizing discourses, ordaining as monks and living as anagarikas. Buddhist culture is not flowery or ostentatious; it is spartan and unassuming, almost indiscernible most of the time. I remember meeting my first Buddhist at a house party in Toronto. I had been invited by a woman I was interested in and had been drinking alcohol, I think. I remember coming out onto the porch and sitting on the front steps with a small group of party-goers just as one of them made mention of another being Buddhist. I looked at the guy and sized him up. I remember him wearing natural-tone clothes, maybe an off-white cotton top. "You're a Buddhist?" I asked. He nodded, not like a sage or guru, more like... humble, unassuming. "Wow." It was all I could think of to say.

What impresses me most about that encounter is how unimpressive it was. It was so... nothing. It wasn't that he was disappointing, it was like he just didn't stand out, but in a good way. Sure, it's probably just a romantic skewed memory, but it's how I remember my first encounter of the Buddhist kind.

I think that's how Buddhist culture should be. I'm starting to think the colour of my robes gives the wrong impression; maybe I'll try to pick up some of the Dhammayut coloured robes; darker, less flashy. Because I really do believe that the monkhood is the best part of Buddhist culture. Being a monk is the one thing in my life that has felt comfortable, right. But it's become, in places, at times, just what Buddhist culture is not - fanciful and ostentatious.

That's the first problem; adding to Buddhist culture and religion elements that don't

belong. The second problem, though, is stripping away Buddhist culture and leaving the religion without its protective shield. Denying or nullifying the usefulness of the monastic order, neglecting the meditator precepts, eschewing formal meditation practice for day-to-day mindfulness or worse, mere study of the scriptural teachings. This, I'm afraid, is what North American Buddhists are most often guilty of.

A new-comer to a religion always has a fresh outlook on the teachings. They can more quickly distinguish fluff from substance than those immersed in the religion since birth, and they tend to be more passionate about the core and less interested in the outer bark. I submit that this is not exactly what is happening in the West, or even in the East for that matter, since there are an increasing percentage of Buddhist new-comers in Buddhist countries as well. What we are seeing, rather, I think, is a) a difficulty in distinguishing the proverbial infant from the proverbial wash, and b) the supplanting of the baby with some sort of Frankenstein version of the same and hoping the bubbles hide the scars.

Ick. Okay, serious face. Parsimony is a great thing, to a point. Let's not worry so much about our rituals and ceremonies, or how, where, or when we sit in meditation. But let's not throw away the beautiful and useful frameworks that the fully-enlightened Buddha himself laid down. Not yet, not while we still has some idea of them.

As for our Franken-baby, I've made reference to how established Buddhist cultures have made them in the East, but I think the same concerns can be voiced in the West, at the very least as a cautionary tale of what may come. Already, the baby is losing his limbs - reincarnation and the monastic order are more or less out the window in many Western Buddhist washrooms. What will be their replacement? The promise that meditation will lower one's blood pressure is a poor transplant for the promise that it will close the gates of hell for eternity; likewise, a married couple teaching loving-kindness to a group of well-intentioned business people in their living room lacks the physical beauty and power of a rag-robed recluse on a rock exhorting a group of similarly clad beings in forbearance towards life-threatening pain and sickness.

The point, if there is to be one, is that the West is as capable of turning culture into religion as the East; that they haven't, if they haven't, is only for lack of opportunity. Where Buddhism has taken root outside of its greenhouses, it has taken root only in small patches, stunted and often unrecognizable. That is as it should be, I think, in the beginning. There is no shame in growing a small garden; just be sure it is not filled with weeds. Rather than designing our own greenhouses in which to house this most precious of flora and risk ruining the crop in our ineptitude, we really should strive insofar as possible to adopt the plans of the master gardener. Simply put, there *is* such thing as Buddhist culture, and while it should not be taken as seriously as Buddhist religion, it should be


taken seriously in its own right, out of respect for the religion that spawned it.

The objection may be raised, of course, that Buddhist culture was spawned from Indian society; much of it must therefore be considered Indian and not suited to other societies. It must be conceded that this is a possibility in certain cases. It doesn't follow that the entirety of the monastic order and Buddhist cosmology is simply a pandering to the Hindustani. In fact, most of what can be classified as truly Buddhist (i.e. coming from the Buddha) culture is not only amenable to integration into but also protective against the cultures with which it come in contact. Meaning, it serves as a buffer that allows the Buddhist religion to flourish in its unadulterated form. Cultural exclusionism can be a powerful weapon for good or evil.


Okay, that's all. Hopefully this hasn't been too dense. Apologies if it has come across as any kind of rant or venting of frustration, which I don't think it is. All this talk about culture came rather from a thoughtful conversation I had with someone here about the dangers of culture, and I guess I've been meaning to talk about it for a while now.

Peace :)


Yuttadhammo Bhikkhu at 10:34 AM

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Yes, The mind is everything. What you think you become.>> <http://www.kirpalsingh-histruesuccessor.org/>



**Imani Willis**

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Forgive me, I just can't believe, that you believe, that Yuttadhammo doesn't know the things you have posted. What you have said is so fundamental it would be scary if a monk didn't know it.



**Imani Willis**

5 years ago

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A comment on Ratanayano's comment

Although what you have said is no doubt true, it is only a concept itself. But it can be no other way, for without concept there is no communication. what is language but symbols for different concepts. There is something you have left unsaid, your motivations are unclear.



**Michael Roe**

5 years ago (edited)

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Ven. Yuttadhammo, a very important and timely article. In my view, what makes Gautama Buddha's Dhamma so important and relevant is its timelessness...the core Dhamma itself is

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