Norman Fischer
When You Greet Me I Bow
Week Three: "Culture"
October 16, 2021

Hi everybody. Today, I want to talk about Buddhism as a culture. Early on in the Buddhist movement in the West, we had the idea that we could take the essence of Buddhism out of its various cultures and leave the cultural baggage behind—after all, we weren't Japanese or Thai or Chinese. We believed we could take the real Buddhism out. Today, brain research seems to corroborate that meditation changes the brain and that we don't need robes and chanting and all that—Buddhism is scientifically sound, and all the rest of it is just window dressing.

But I'm not so sure about that. Meditation, like everything else, comes wrapped in a package and wrapped in a culture. When we say we're taking it out of its cultural trappings, what we mean is we're changing the cultural trappings from medieval Japan, let's say, to 21st-century secular, scientific materialistic culture, which is a culture too. That raises the question of what do we lose, if anything, if we have ripped Buddhism out of the cultures that have always carried it? Maybe we *do* need some of the Buddhist culture. And yet it is true that we're never going to be Chinese or Japanese, so if we do try to keep the Chinese and Japanese surround of Buddhism, we're almost definitely going to misunderstand, misperceive, or appropriate that culture in a neocolonial way.

So what are we going to do? In the San Francisco Zen Center temples, and I think in most of Zen in the West, we do maintain a lot of the traditional surround of meditation: the robes, the bowing, the chanting, all very specific practices that we've inherited from our Japanese Zen ancestors. But then there's also the wider issue of Buddhist thought. Buddhist thought, Buddhist scripture, is also part of the Buddhist culture. Often in Western Buddhism, we emphasize meditation far more than it was ever emphasized in Asia. Buddhism is a set of ideas too. It's a way of understanding life. I remember when I first heard about the four noble truths, the first being that all conditioned existence has the nature of suffering, I was liberated by that thought because I had thought that suffering was a mistake or a problem that could be fixed or ought to be fixed and that if I was suffering, it was somehow my fault.

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In other words, Buddhist ideas are very powerful. The idea of the four noble truths—suffering, the origination of suffering, the stopping of suffering, and the path, which includes right understanding, right thinking, right speech, and so on—these are powerful teachings that are culture. To be taught that there is a way to have an open, nonjudgmental awareness of our experience and that that kind of awareness can be healing—that's a Buddhist teaching and part of Buddhist culture. It's a point of view that can be very helpful. In fact, these Buddhist ideas are now pervasive in our Western culture. Sometimes they don't appear as Buddhist ideas or are not called Buddhist ideas, but they're all over the place. They've pervaded psychology and all kinds of fields, and they often rhyme with our own cultural values that perhaps have not been fully realized until their encounter with Buddhist culture. This is a very complicated and rich exchange as Buddhism as a culture begins to permeate our world.

I'm going to read to you a little bit from my book, *When You Greet Me I Bow: Notes and Reflections from a Life in Zen*. This is from "Notes on Cultural Encounter."

> The question of cultural influence is complicated and, these days, a point of bitter contention. Who owns what? Who gets to speak? Who speaks for whom? Colonialism and historical dominance of one culture by another means that cultures have often encountered each other on unequal terms. Sometimes the very survival or ongoing development of a culture is at stake in the encounter. What we call Buddhism is a case in point. It has traveled from India through the many cultures of Central, Southeast, and East Asia, and now to the multiple cultures of the West.
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> Cultures, of course, have always communicated, they can't help doing this, and the taking on by one culture of a form or idea from another culture changes both. The receiving culture, necessarily bound by its own way of looking at things, is guaranteed to misunderstand and twist what it is taking in. And it goes both ways: the transmitting culture will be influenced in a feedback loop by that very misunderstanding (or perhaps a different understanding) to see itself in a new light. There isn't and has never been any unitary or coherent culture, pure

and distinct, no matter how much anyone claims this; and though it's the job of historians and cultural critics to parse shapes and processes of cultures, no one can have anything to say about this that isn't tentative and itself already culturally biased. We are all culturally myopic, as we have been discovering and acknowledging for some time now.

When it was introduced to the modern West several hundred years ago (taking, of course, under advisement dubious terms like West and East), Buddhism was naturally considered an exotic and quite strange Eastern religion. When I first began to practice, Zen possessed a distinctly Japanese aura. Of course, we assumed that our Japanese teachers understood Zen—we did not, so we ought to take their word for it. These powerful men (they were all men) were charming, charismatic, and dedicated. We asked them lively questions, of course, but we did not question their authority or the religion that they were bringing.

My first encounter with the Japanese Zen master (the great Shibayama Roshi of Nansenji Monastery) was at a month-long retreat in upstate New York in the late 1960s. At the end of each day, our retreat cohort would discuss whether Shibayama Roshi appeared special and impressive to us because he was enlightened or because he was Japanese. We could never decide.

50 years on, Zen and Buddhism are almost completely acculturated into Europe, Australia, North America, and Latin America, and, because of this, although Zen is essentially the same religion and has always been in Japan, it is understood quite differently there. One of my poetry books is called "Escape This Crazy Life of Tears: Japan 2010." It's a long diary poem about our pilgrimage there, in which I write that in Japan, Zen is all about the past and honoring the past. In the West, Zen is all about the present and the future and our lives now. These days, sometimes young Japanese monastics come to the United States or to Europe to study Zen because they imagine something there more authentic and more lively than the time-encrusted tradition that stifles them at home. But there are traditionalists in Japan (and elsewhere in Asia), and there are even American and European Zen priests and lay traditionalists who go to Japan seeking what they consider authentic Zen. So who owns Zen, and what is Zen? Which Zen is authentic? Is even the idea of authentic Zen already suspicious? Or what about East and West? Was there ever really and truly an East and a West?

The basic thrust of human character formation as Sigmund Freud conceived it in Vienna in the 19th century doesn't necessarily compute if you are born and raised in Beijing, Tokyo, Mumbai, or Lhasa. There's a famous story that

the Dalai Lama was baffled by the concept of "low self-esteem" since as far as he was concerned (and as Buddhist teachings state), all human beings love themselves much more than they love others. In Tibetan Buddhist practices for the development of compassion and love, students visualize their mothers, who are assumed to be the paragons of caring and kindness. Tibetans at first did a double take when they heard that Westerners did not always view their mothers as loving individuals and that a lot of people had so-called mother issues. This shocked the Tibetans.

Once I was doing a reading at a bookstore in Vancouver, British Columbia, and a young Chinese woman in the audience said that when she was growing up in China, she thought of Buddhism as very silly stuff relevant only to superstitious grandmothers, who would burn fake paper money to send funds to their ancestors in heaven. But then she went to Canada and saw all these educated white people doing Buddhism, and she thought there must be something to it, so she began her Buddhist practice.

I repeated this story some months later at a dharma talk, and somebody yelled at me and said I was a cultural imperialist and I was implying that old Chinese people were stupid and backward and that only we educated modern Westerners really knew what Buddhism was and was supposed to be.

She had a point. Some of the Western Buddhists, taking off from the original people in the West who discovered Buddhism, Germans and British people who had colonized Asian countries and rediscovered Buddhism. They thought, "We're going to purify Buddhism from these backward cultures. Our Buddhism is much better than the way they take it."

But contemporary scholars of religion look at this quite differently. They have uncovered the clear biases of the early scholars who were studying a Buddhism that they did not realize they themselves were constructing through their Western lens. Today's scholars say that a religion isn't what texts seem to say it is. Texts can be read in many ways, especially when you're reading them across cultures and languages. Religion, contemporary scholars of religion say, is what people who practice it feel, and think, do and believe, as they interpret (or ignore) these texts. Religions don't become corrupted over time, as people used to think. But they do certainly change, for better or worse, according to the uses that people need to make of them.

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This is what I wanted to tell you today: first of all, Buddhism is a culture. It’s not just meditation. Second, Buddhism is an Asian culture that we are not necessarily understanding—in fact, we’re probably misunderstanding it, and whether we feel like it or not, whether we are trying to or not, we are changing that culture to suit the needs of the world we live in. It’s better if we understand all of that.

Thank you very much for listening to my talk. The fourth talk in the series is going to be on engagement and how we engage our practice in our lives and in the world. Thank you very, very much for listening.