

frequencies

a collaborative genealogy of spirituality

the Clifton Buddha

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In a sparse, basement-level room of the Unitarian Church in a small Midwestern city—let's call it Clifton—the fifteen or so members of the Clifton sangha gather on a Wednesday evening. There is no authorized teacher, though some members have studied with Zen or Tibetan teachers. Elaine, who convenes the weekly meditation session, pulls a ten-inch bronze Buddha statue out of a cabinet and places it on a small table. She leads a short Zen chant, and the group sits in meditation facing the wall for thirty minutes,

followed by a reading, then ten minutes of walking meditation. After another brief chant, the group turns toward the Buddha image and bows deeply.

O Shariputra, form is emptiness, emptiness is form

Form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form...

Across the globe, there are countless images similar to the one to which these Midwesterners bow. This one was purchased in Lhasa, Tibet, at one of the dozens of open-air vendors on the circumambulation circuit around Jokhang Temple. Pilgrims come from all over Tibet to walk or prostrate around the circuit, spinning prayer wheels and chanting mantras. During a two-week trip to China, another member of the sangha, Carl, chose this statue from hundreds of others available. The vendor tried first to offer Carl a new factory-made buddha, but he asked for one that looked older, more antique, so the vendor dutifully mused one up a bit and brought it back the next day. Finally they settled on an older figure that, the vendor claimed, was once used in a Tibetan monastery. After the monastery was dismantled by the Chinese during the Cultural Revolution, it stayed in a devotee's house for a few decades and then found its way to the open market. Carl wanted an "authentic" image rather than one made in a factory, one that was made for a spiritual purpose rather than just to sell to tourists.

According to the vendor, the image was crafted by an artisan over sixty years ago. If this is accurate, it would have sat in limbo when completed alongside the other bronze buddhas in the studio with scarves wrapped around their eyes. When they were installed in a temple, a monk would have performed a consecration ceremony that has been going on since before the common era in which the Buddha is invited to take up residence in the image. In the final stage of the ritual, the scarf is removed and the eyes are painted in. Then the Buddha can look out at the devotees who come and prostrate themselves before it, praying for a better rebirth in the next lifetime, alleviation of sickness, or success on exams.

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Carl's buddha now finds its home in the basement at the Unitarian Church, where it is kept most of the time in a dark cabinet. On Wednesday evenings, Elaine brings it out, sets it on a makeshift altar and lights a stick of incense before it.

A few in the sangha admit that they think there may be a special quality to items that have had intimate interaction with advanced practitioners—a kind of spiritual “energy.” But no one in the group thinks that bowing before it will give them karmic merit, success in business ventures, material prosperity, or a better rebirth. They are happy that it is old and consecrated, but they don’t believe that the Buddha dwells in the statue. Its eyes are as blind as metal deep in the cold earth.

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The image’s status in Clifton, therefore, is somewhat demoted from the one it enjoyed in Lhasa. Before we invite Max Weber in to declare it disenchanting, though, let us note the new kinds of enchantment it picks up in its new home at the far lower elevations of the Midwestern prairie. The biblical prohibition against idolatry, and its cousin, the scientific naturalist prohibition against naively attributing conscious life to an inanimate collection of atoms and molecules, demarcate certain limitations to this sangha’s reverence toward any statue. But there are deep currents of western culture that predispose these modern Buddhists toward disillusionment with the promises of modernity, its technology, its factories and corporations that promise to manufacture happiness for the masses. An old bronze statue from Tibet embodies the imagined antithesis of the failed promises of techno-rational-consumerist modernity. Tibet, in fact, has held such a place in the western imagination for well over a century—the last bastion of pre-modern wisdom, isolated beyond the Himalayas, its society devoted to spiritual wisdom that some even today hope will save modern humanity from itself. Coming from the land of the snows gives it the charisma of the mysterious, the lost, the authentic. And authenticity, as Walter Benjamin noted, is only possible after it has been replaced by the regime of mechanically produced commodities (after which, it is itself offered as a commodity).

The charisma of the lost Other of modernity only goes so far, though. The Clifton Sangha, after all, is an educated bunch. Of the fifteen, four are college professors (two in the sciences), three are engineers, and all but two have college degrees. Most are not content with dreamy, New Age longing. And some are a bit uncomfortable bowing to a statue. But they have agreed to continue the practice, insisting to anyone who asks that this is not idolatry and that the image is entirely symbolic. This object is ultimately a piece of metal, like any other. Nevertheless, for them it has its own kind of enchantment because it silently speaks of the possibility that beneath or within atoms and molecules—and especially within the mind itself—there

is a cosmic spirit, a consciousness infusing the whole of things that connects everything with everything else, a vast interconnected network of life that weaves everything together into unity and harmony, overriding the countless fragmentations and contradictions of the modern world. Buddha-nature, says 13th century Zen master Dogen Zenji, is neither east nor west, north or south. It pervades everything—is everything.

One bit of matter is, therefore, as good as any other for representing this cosmic truth. Thus, Elaine says, we choose a bit that represents someone seeing into that truth—the Buddha sitting under the tree of enlightenment. Spirituality in this sense does not oppose materiality—it encompasses everything—but it disposes of local gods, gods of a particular culture, place, and time. The Buddha can be in everything but not one particular thing.

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When the Taliban blew up the Buddhas of Bamiyan, one of the sangha members insists, Buddhists weren't bothered at all. "They're just pieces of stone," he says with a shrug.

A few weeks later in my Buddhism class, I discuss the image of the Buddha and its role in various Buddhist traditions. At one point I pull a small Buddha statue out of a bag and begin to place it on the table, but it slips a bit and almost falls over, clunking heavily onto the surface. The young Thai women in the front row gasps in distress.

...form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form...

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When Carl went to Tibet, he couldn't help feel somewhat disappointed at the amount of ritual, liturgy, image-worship, and "superstitious" practices that he witnessed. He saw no one meditating. The reverence they seemed to show for the large buddha statues in the temples disconcerted him. Many Tibetans, he concluded, practice a kind of "cultural" Buddhism. It's just a part of their culture, so they do it. Spirituality, as Elaine, Carl, and many other Western Buddhists understand it, transcends "culture." It is the encounter with the universal. This puts them in an ambivalent relationship to even Buddhist culture.

Many western practitioners in the twentieth century have understood Buddhism as a matter of transcending cultural conditioning. Alan Watts insisted on a distinction between the “acquired self” and “your genuine, deepest self, not the self which depends on family and conditioning, on learning and experience, or any kind of artifice” but on Buddha-nature itself—the “original face” of the famous Zen koan. For Watts, Zen requires a person to realize that the “ego, the self which he has believed himself to be, is nothing but a pattern of habits or artificial reaction.” As Buddhism has been enfolded into western spirituality, it has often operated on some version of the idea, derived largely from Romanticism and modernism, that:

within each human being there is an individuality lying in potentiality, which seeks an occasion for realization but is held in the toils of the rules, beliefs, and roles which society imposes . . . that the real state of the self is very different from the acquired baggage which institutions like families, schools, and universities impose. To be “true to oneself” means . . . discovering what is contained in the uncontaminated self, the self which has been freed from the encumbrance of accumulated knowledge, norms, and ideals handed down by previous generations.

The East Asian conception of Buddha-nature—all-pervasive and embedded in each individual—is drawn magnetically to this indigenous western notion of transcendent selfhood, sometimes intertwining indistinguishably with it. Buddhist societies in East Asia, however, have generally been decidedly non-individualistic, seeing individual selfhood as deeply embedded in and dependent on social relations. Freedom from conditioning doesn’t mean freedom from society and its influences but from past karma. Universality doesn’t always override particularity.

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The Buddha statue of the Clifton sangha, therefore, displays the antinomies of its new function in its new home. It is an undeniably cultural product of another culture, deployed to symbolize the transcendence of one’s own culture toward a universal spirituality that overcomes, yet includes, all cultures.

The space for this particular articulation of Buddhism is created by specific cultural currents in the modern West: Romantics, Idealists, Transcendentalists, and their mid-twentieth-century counter-cultural successors, all of whom emphasize exploration of the deep interior of the mind, God as an all-

encompassing spirit in nature, spontaneity, creativity, and suspicion of mechanized reproduction; Protestant Christianity, which eschews idolatry, privileges texts, looks askance at priesthoods and hierarchies; Enlightenment rationalism, which promises insight into the nature of things through careful observation and thought; psychology, which encourages introspection and exploration of the mind; and global capitalism, which allows for the flow of commodities newly valued in the West, like our Buddha image, by those who can afford them.

Thus Buddhism takes on yet another incarnation, blending with the indigenous cultures of the West, the United States, the Midwest, and Clifton. Even here, though, it turns out to be one incarnation among many. For our Buddha image unexpectedly finds its own kin scattered about—down the street in a temple where Vietnamese immigrants and their children bow and pray for good grades; in the backyard garden of a house in the suburbs; on a poster on the wall of a head shop downtown. The buddhas proliferate, mingle with the local gods, invite reverent or suspicious gazes, and take unexpected places on shelves, altars, and nooks throughout North America.

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<http://frequencies.ssrc.org/2011/10/04/the-clifton-buddha/>