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Reflecting on Anti-Asian Racism in North American Sanghas

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At the beginning of April, a surprising comment was left in the Contemporary Buddhist Studies group on Facebook. Under an event titled “Buddhist Perspectives on White Racial Ignorance and Identity,” a commenter wrote: “I’ve said it before, but since I left the South, the places I have seen the most explicit and ugly anti-Asian racism has [sic] been in predominantly white American sanghas.” To practicing North American Buddhists this comment might seem out of step with their understanding of the Buddhist tradition. However, behind this comment (and the communities to which it refers) is a history of racial segregation and discrimination in North American Buddhism, which has evidently continued up to the present day. Unpacking this comment and the history behind it is both straightforward and slightly complicated but is certainly a useful exercise for remembering this history and reminding ourselves of its impact today.

On the simple side of things, we can trace a direct way in which the historical narrative of “Two Buddhisms” emerged in North American Buddhism and parsed white and non-white bodies into separate spaces. In short, scholars of North American Buddhism identify two parallel tra-

jectories along which Buddhism in America developed. First, there were the transplanted schools of Buddhism brought by Asian Buddhist immigrants who came in large numbers after the repeal of racist immigration laws with the 1965 Immigration Act. Scholars have called this “Immigrant Buddhism” or, more appropriately, “Heritage Buddhism” to denote the Buddhist communities that largely preserve the Buddhisms of Asia. Second, there is a distinct development of “Convert Buddhism” that was largely propagated and practiced by white male individuals. This lineage is generally traced back to the early nineteenth century and the establishment of the Transcendental Club in New England which included figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau who began studying Eastern religion. This effort gave rise to early English translations of Buddhist texts such as Elizabeth Peabody’s 1844 translation of *The Lotus Sutra*. More interest was garnered among the American public at the end of the century with the publication of Edwin Arnold’s 1879 book *The Light of Asia* and the Chicago World Parliament of Religions in 1893. After this initial surge, interest in Buddhism was somewhat stagnant until individuals like Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki, Shunryū Suzuki, Alan Watts, and members of the Beat Generation like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg revitalized interest in the 1950s. From this point onwards, convert Buddhism in America steadily grew from these roots and developed its own religious priorities and emphases.

Intrinsic to this typology of “Two Buddhisms,” and to understanding the comment that spurred this discussion, is how heritage and convert Buddhism lack significant overlap in their aesthetics, soteriological priorities, and, more than anything, patronage. Of course, there are exceptions to this strict dichotomy such as the sangha that developed around the Zen teacher Shunryū Suzuki, author of the seminal *Zen Mind*,

Beginner's Mind.¹ Suzuki travelled to America in order to serve the religious needs of the Japanese immigrant population in the Bay Area of California. When Alan Watts invited Suzuki to lecture to an enthusiastic audience at the Kato Institute, he realized that Americans also had an interest in Zen and started inviting (mostly white) San Franciscans to his centre to practice zazen. Despite occupying the same physical space, the convert sangha that grew around Suzuki had little contact with the Japanese immigrant community at the San Francisco Zen Center and eventually eclipsed the latter's population to become the dominant community at the centre. The San Francisco Zen Center is thus not only emblematic of the way in which heritage and convert Buddhism developed separately, and with little intellectual, cultural, or even physical contact with one another, but also how convert Buddhism slowly established itself as the dominant hegemonic force in North American Buddhism.

With this history of the "Two Buddhisms" understood, we can turn to how they relate to one another and why this matters to the anti-Asian racism in white North American sanghas. This is where the explanation for our commenter's observation gets slightly complicated. Recent work by Adeana McNicholl² and Chenxing Han³ have greatly nuanced this "Two Buddhisms" typology by bringing the unique experiences of African and Asian Americans to the forefront of their analyses. In doing so, they have provided counternarratives to the often white-supremacist origins of Western Buddhism that created these separate categories in the first place. Nonetheless, this typology provides a useful analytical tool for understanding not only the ongoing trends of Western Buddhism but also the comment that began this article. These two Buddhisms, convert and heritage, are placed in binary opposition to one an-

¹ For a detailed account of Suzuki's tenure in America, see Chadwick, *Crooked Cucumber*.

² McNicholl, "Being Buddha," 883-911.

³ Han and Gleig, "Young. Asian. American. Buddhist."

other and are differentiated along several different axes. Essentially, Convert Buddhism is painted as being:

- 1) concerned with meditation over ritual;
- 2) in accordance with neuroscientific understandings of the mind;
- 3) rational and based on academic textual interpretation;
- 4) directed towards happiness and productivity; and
- 5) primarily composed of white, upper-middle class people.

In contrast, Heritage Buddhism is considered to be:

- 1) concerned with ritual over meditation;
- 2) opposed to science in its adherence to religious cosmologies;
- 3) superstitious and deviant to an idealized textual Buddhism;
- 4) directed towards accumulating merit and getting a favourable rebirth; and
- 5) primarily composed of Asian immigrants and their descendants.

Important to this classification is *who* is depicting the two traditions in this way. While scholars are the ones identifying the developments of these two Buddhisms, it is Convert Buddhists who are characterizing themselves and Heritage Buddhists in accordance with the above criteria. This view of Convert Buddhism as exceptional amongst religious traditions by virtue of its purported rationality, scientific validity, and immanent concern has been given a thorough critique in recent works by Evan Thompson and Glenn Wallis, but it is nonetheless still a persistent view in these circles.⁴

⁴ See Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*.

If it is not yet obvious, this classification is not value-neutral but is the very source of the aforementioned hate. In the last century, many similar binaries have been analysed and critiqued on the grounds that they create a hierarchical view and lead to oppression of an imagined “other.” This has largely been conducted by feminist scholars and those whom they have inspired. At its most developed, these critiques aim to identify and dismantle all of the binaries that lead to the exploitation of marginalized communities. Writing about ecofeminism, Hobgood-Oster notes that these binaries can include “heaven/Earth, mind/body, male/female, human/ animal, spirit/matter, culture/nature, white/non-white,” and that these systems “continue to manifest their abusive powers by reinforcing assumptions of these binaries, even making them sacred through religious and scientific constructs.”⁵ This is precisely what is happening in the characterization of Convert and Heritage Buddhism.

In the Convert/Heritage binary, each aspect of Convert Buddhism is privileged over those of Heritage Buddhism such that Convert Buddhism gets placed above Heritage Buddhism. Meditation is more appealing than ritual, science is privileged over religion, reason is placed above “superstition,” and immanent goals are preferred over those that deal with speculative accounts of the afterlife. And while our liberal society would hesitate to ascribe such value judgements on the racial dimension of this binary, this judgement does not need to be said out loud to still be existent. The implication is right in our face. Racial dimensions *cannot* escape this privileging of Convert Buddhism over Heritage Buddhism, and the way in which this placement is inherently racialized creates an environment in which Asian bodies are valued less and are hence less accepted than white bodies in North American Buddhist spaces.

⁵ Hobgood-Oster, “Ecofeminism,” 534.

This is why our commenter saw anti-Asian hate in white American (read: Convert) Buddhist spaces, and this is how anti-Asian racism can exist among North American Buddhism despite the tradition's Asian roots. Understanding the conditions by which Heritage Buddhism and its racialized adherents are painted as "others," and derided as lower than white Convert Buddhists, can help us address the anti-Asian racism that has been arising ever more frequently in Western Buddhist (and non-Buddhist) contexts. Lived religions can look quite different from how texts depict them, and the idealized form of Buddhism that manifests as Convert Buddhism is founded on an academic preoccupation with philology and textual interpretation over ethnography and an attention to the lives of ordinary Buddhists. Those in Convert-Buddhist communities must come to realize that the lived tradition of Heritage Buddhism is an equally valid collection of Buddhist communities despite it not perfectly reflecting some imagined ideal derived from Buddhist texts. In doing so, we may be able to address some of the anti-Asian racism present in these communities and, together, help bridge the gap between Heritage and Convert Buddhism.

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