

Culture Shock

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When you come to practice the Dhamma, there are a lot of times when you experience culture shock. It's not a question of going from a Western culture to an Asian culture. It's going from a culture of ordinary people with defilements – Asian or Western – to the culture of the Noble Ones. Their culture involves a radically different set of values, a different etiquette, a different purpose.

The culture of ordinary people – no matter where in the world – is just to keep families going, to keep the human race surviving, to keep people clothed and fed, to try to sort out a balance among different peoples' greed, anger, and delusion in such a way that things are relatively peaceful. But this always takes place within the context of what's possible in a world where when you have gain, loss; status, loss of status; praise, criticism; pleasure, pain. These things all come in pairs, so you don't get anything that's totally whole.

The purpose of the customs of the Noble Ones, however, is to lead to something that, as Luang Pu Dune once said, is one single thing all the way through. There's no concern about keeping the human race going or keeping your appetites going, but there *is* a focused concern on finding a true happiness. That one point, that one focus, trumps everything else. And it affects everything within the culture – from the way we walk, the way we talk, what we wear, what we eat, the kind of shelter we look for, the medicine we use, everything from the very basics all the way up to how we comprehend our own minds.

So as you shift from one culture to the next, there are bound to be periods of culture shock. But you have to keep reminding yourself that the purpose of all this is to take seriously the deep desire that everyone has for true happiness.

If you think about it, you'll see that the Buddha was a very demanding person: He wanted nothing less than absolute happiness, a happiness that was one single thing all the way through, that didn't have other things nibbling away at the edges. So even though he had wealth, status, all of what they call the good things of the world, they weren't good enough for him. His totally overwhelming motivation was a desire for true happiness, a happiness with no drawbacks – in other words, a happiness that wasn't going to cause suffering for other people either. It would have to be a happiness built on developing his inner resources, one that wouldn't have to take anything away from anyone else. Instead of taking things, he lived off of what people offered him, as a way of making that happiness more pure. He also realized that that happiness was not going to come from owning or having things. He was going to have to teach his

mind to be more self-reliant, and by developing that self-reliance he found that there's a lot more to the mind than he originally expected.

So as you come to the Dhamma, try to keep that same purpose in mind: a true happiness that doesn't have to depend on anything, a happiness that's one thing all the way through. And of course there will be culture shock when your ordinary old desires, your old habits are thwarted, screaming for attention. But you have to look: Exactly where are they going to take you? They take you back to that world of opposites, the world where there's nothing in a really pure form. If you're nurturing your desires in that context, you're simply learning to put up with second best.

There was an article recently in *Tricycle* where a psychologist was arguing that the true Buddhist attitude toward craving is that craving or desire is really a problem only if you want the objects of your craving to be total, to be with you forever. As long as you're realistic and realize that nothing lasts forever, he said, then desire is no problem. Just learn not to cling to the object of your desire. Just be content with being with the desire itself.

That's his idea of being realistic, and of course that has nothing to do with what the Buddha taught. As the Buddha taught, it's not so much that we cling to the objects of our desire, we cling to the desire itself, we crave desire itself. It's something we enjoy. And if desire without latching on to the expectation of permanent objects for the desire were okay, then why is there so much trouble from sexual predators or war mongers who don't really care to hold on to their conquests but want to keep going on for more and more and more? They like the process. They like the thrill of the chase. And this is the real problem with human desire. In its quest for "enough" in terms of the things of the world, it never can find satisfaction, so it always keeps wanting more and more. In this way it wrecks the world, and also wrecks the mind.

So we have to find something that will put the mind in a state where it doesn't need to desire anything anymore. Part of this quest means learning to temper your desires, but it also means refocusing them. Instead of having scattered desires for all things in all different directions, you focus it on one big desire: the desire for total freedom. Now, what's radical about the Buddha's teachings is that that desire is realistic, too – that desire for total freedom, ultimate happiness.

After all, isn't that why we desire things? We hope that they'll give us happiness, and they end up not giving it. Psychologists have done studies showing that people are very unrealistic about the amount of happiness they're going to get out of things. Relationships, advancement at work, a new car: These things are painted in all kinds of beautiful colors in the mind, and yet when we actually get them, the colors fade. This sets you up for wanting something else. You keep going in that direction, and there's no end to it. But even though we've been disappointed before, even though we've seen the colors fade right before our eyes, we start imagining, "Well, the next one, the next person, the next thing,

the next position in life – that'll have colors that are colorfast." But it doesn't work out that way.

It's like the old story of the person eating peppers and crying because the peppers were hot. And the people said to him, "Why do you keep on eating peppers?" And he said, "Well, I hope to find the sweet one in here someplace." That's the way most people are about their happiness.

According to the Buddha, though, there is one thing that doesn't disappoint. When you pursue Awakening, when you pursue nibbana, it's not going to lead to disappointment. Quite the contrary, it goes wildly beyond your expectations, wildly beyond your hopes. Even just the first taste of the Deathless, stream entry, is enough to produce a seismic shift in your whole awareness, your whole understanding in what you think you are, and what's possible in life, and in the importance of your own actions. Once you reach that state, your conviction in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha is unshakeable. Your standards for what counts as true happiness get ratcheted up immeasurably.

But in the meantime, until you reach that state, you're going to have shakable conviction. It's part of the game. It's only to be expected because you haven't seen the results really turn into something earthshaking yet. This is why you have to work at your sense of conviction. Your drive for true happiness, your belief that such a thing is possible, is what's going to see you over the hurdles placed in your way. Your conviction that there is a way out is what's going to help find that way out.

Like someone lost in the forest: If you're not really convinced that there's a way out, you give up very easily. You run into a thicket here, a steep cliff there, and it just seems way too much. It stops you. But if you're convinced there's got to be a way out, you've heard of other people who've made their way out, you think, "It's got to be in here someplace." You keep looking, looking, looking. And finally you see how the other people made their way out: "Oh. That was the path they took."

So conviction plays an important role in the path. The Buddha cites it as the first strength of mind that leads to Awakening: conviction in the Buddha's Awakening, conviction in the principle of kamma. The Buddha was a human being; he did it through his own actions. You're a human being; you can do it through yours.

This also requires having a single-minded focus, a single-minded respect for your desire for a really single, totally unadulterated happiness – a happiness that doesn't keep corroding at the edges, doesn't have other stains mixed in. It's something total. Deep down inside, that's what we all want, but part of us doesn't believe it's real. We've been taught so much – this culture that we're trying to outgrow has been teaching us all along – that total happiness isn't possible. "Content yourself with what we have to offer. We have nice jobs, we have nice cars, nice families. If you don't like a family you can have an affair." All the legal and illegal pleasures that worldly cultures promise: They teach you

to settle for these things. And people have been settling for them for how many lifetimes?

But the Buddha tells you, “Don’t settle for that. Aim higher. Aim at the heart’s true desire: unmitigated happiness, total freedom.” Because it’s here that effort is well spent. The Buddha saw that our experience of the world – these four dimensions of space and time – depends on our own karmic input. A constant effort is required to keep it going, keep it going, keep it going. And the question is, “Is it worth it?” If you look at the world of conditioned things, if those are your goals, they’re not worth it at all because they come only to fade, fade, fade away.

But the Buddha realized that conditioned things are also conditioning things. In other words, these fabricated things, if you learn how to use them skillfully lead someplace. Even if you don’t learn how to use them skillfully, they still lead places: random places, miserable places. The question is, “Do you really want to go where they’re taking you?” If you make the effort to get skillful at fashioning conditioned things, they can lead you to a happiness that’s worthwhile, that can be taken as a goal in and of itself.

So we’re living in the same world of conditioned things as everyone else, but we’re approaching them in a different way. This is what makes the culture of the Noble Ones so special. The cultures of the world teach us to delight in gaining conditioned things – thrills, people, power, possessions – thinking that we can stop there. The culture of the Noble Ones, though, teaches us to delight in developing skillful mental states, to delight in abandoning unskillful mental states, for the purpose of a happiness that’s unconditioned.

You do this by developing the conviction that there is a release. As the Buddha saw, the laws of causality are such that there are points of resonance, as in chaos theory, where the laws of your causal experience lead you to an opening that takes you out of this system entirely. That’s possible. That effort, he says, is worth it. And it’s up to us. As the Buddha said, this opportunity is here. We have this human life. What are we going to do with it? Are we going to explore that possibility? Are we going to test it to see if what he’s saying is true? Are we going to stick with the limited possibilities offered by our old culture, or are we going to try the possibilities promised in the culture of the Noble Ones? The nature of what the Buddha promises is really inviting, even though it’s challenging. And it seems a shame that people don’t take him up on that challenge – but we can’t make the choice for other people. It’s a choice that each of us has to make for himself or herself alone. But you find that if you stick with that desire for a dependable happiness, if you stick with the conviction that it’s possible, the results really are greater than anything you can imagine.