

Losing Our Religion

Have Westerners created a new and viable form of Buddhism, or has something been lost in translation? Berkeley professor Robert Sharf argues that with our emphasis on individual experience and meditation, we risk cutting ourselves off from the benefits of a greater tradition.

By Andrew Cooper
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Robert Sharf's interest in Buddhism began in the early 1970s, when, as a seeker in sandals barely out of his teens, he hopped from one meditation retreat to the next, first in India and Burma, then back in North America. It was shortly after a three-month Vipassana meditation retreat in Bucksport, Maine, in 1975 that Sharf began to wonder whether the single-minded emphasis on meditation characteristic of much of Western Buddhism was in some way misguided. Over time, doubt and confusion gave way to a desire to better understand Buddhism's historical background, which in turn led him to pursue a career in Buddhist scholarship. Today Sharf is the D. H. Chen Distinguished Professor of Buddhist Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. His area of expertise is East Asian Buddhism, most especially the Buddhism of medieval China. He is also an ordained priest in the Hosso school of Japanese Buddhism.

Sharf is also known for his cogent critique of what scholars call Buddhist modernism, a relatively recent movement that selectively places those elements that are consistent with modern sensibilities at the core of the tradition and dismisses all else. Sharf's critique of Buddhist modernism stems from a belief that we cannot reduce Buddhism to a simple set of propositions and practices without in some way distorting our sense of its wholeness and complexity. For Sharf, understanding a religious tradition demands not only familiarity with contemporary practice but also a willingness to enter into dialogue with what is historically past and culturally foreign. To participate in such a dialogue we need knowledge of the context in which the tradition is embedded and an ability to see past the presuppositions of our own time and place. Clearing the ground, as it were, for this dialogue with tradition is the job of critical scholarly practice in religious life.

Throughout the following interview, there is an irony at play. Without the bridges of understanding and the foundations of practice that Buddhist modernists like D. T. Suzuki, Anagarika Dharmapala, and others established, Buddhism would be for Westerners opaque and unapproachably foreign. Even as we regard them with a critical eye, we stand on their broad shoulders.

Maybe this is just how Buddhism works. Maybe this is just why it works. Certainly, in these pluralistic times of competing worldviews and claims to religious truth, we have much to learn from Buddhism's long tradition of integrating self-critique with a rich and vital religious tradition. Perhaps we might say that today to approach religion critically is simply to practice in good faith.

—Andrew Cooper

What is Buddhist modernism? Let's start with an earlier term scholars used for much the same thing: "Protestant Buddhism." The Princeton anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere coined this term in 1970 to refer to developments, beginning in the late nineteenth century, in Asian Buddhist countries that were influenced by and similar to Protestant theological ideas floating around at the time. Earlier in the century, Protestant thinkers, confronting the "crisis of faith" brought on by the rise of science, had developed new ways of thinking about their tradition that were more compatible with the scientific-rational worldview. So they claimed, for example, that "true" Christianity has little to do with rituals or institutions or even doctrine. True Christianity, they said, is a matter of the heart: the personal experience of the divine, a private relationship between an individual and God. Institutions like the Church or an emphasis on ritual or doctrine can stand in the way of this immediate, incontestable relationship with the divine. So religion was construed as a matter of a personal spiritual experience that need not clash with reason or science. What was it about this view of religion that appealed to Buddhists in Asia? By the late nineteenth century, much of Asia was also coming to terms with the rise of the worldview of the modern West. In Buddhist Asia—especially Sri Lanka, Japan, and the parts of Southeast Asia most affected by colonialism, urbanization, industrialization, and other modernizing influences—Buddhist leaders adopted similar strategies for bringing their traditions into the modern world. Many influential Buddhist teachers had received Western-style educations, some in missionary schools, and they were rethinking Buddhism from the ground up. They, too, had to respond to the criticism that religion was just blind faith and superstition,

that the priesthood was self-serving and corrupt, that religious teachings were ultimately incompatible with science and rationality. Obeyesekere used the term “Protestant Buddhism” to refer to the new Buddhist movements that were springing up around this time. But some scholars now feel that the term “Protestant Buddhism” is easily misunderstood—it sounds a bit derogatory, I guess—so they prefer the more neutral term “Buddhist modernism.”

Buddhist modernism was a global movement, a sort of cultural fusion in which the interests of Asian Buddhists and Western Buddhist enthusiasts converged. For the Asians, the critiques of religion that originated in the West resonated with their own needs as they struggled with cultural upheavals in their homelands. For Westerners, Buddhism seemed to provide an attractive spiritual alternative to their own seemingly moribund religious traditions. The irony, of course, is that the Buddhism to which these Westerners were drawn was one already transformed by its contact with the West.

There are two aspects of Buddhist modernism you mention that I am especially interested in hearing you address: Buddhism’s purported compatibility with science and the privileging of individual spirituality over what many consider to be the outer trappings of religion. These are foundational assumptions to many Western Buddhists, yet it is evident from your writings that you regard them as very selective readings of the tradition. Let’s start with the first, the claim that Buddhism is consistent with the Western rational-scientific worldview. This has long been one of its big draws, and it has certainly gotten a lot of play in this magazine. Indeed, it is not uncommon to hear Buddhism spoken of as a science of the mind. The Buddhist canon is so vast that you can always find passages here and there to support whatever reading of the tradition you prefer. For over two thousand years, influential Buddhist teachers read selectively to promote and justify their own understanding of Buddhism, and it is no different with those who want to show that Buddhism is compatible with science. You know, as a young man, D. T. Suzuki [1870–1966]—who was by far the most influential interpreter of Zen Buddhism for the West and the preeminent Buddhist modernist—spent many years in LaSalle, Illinois, where he assisted the publisher Paul Carus, the author of *The Gospel of Buddha*. [See Judith Snodgrass’s review of the new edition online at tricycle.com.] Carus was interested in a grand synthesis of science and religion; he called his philosophy the “Religion of Science” and published many books on it. His enthusiasm for Buddhism stemmed from his conviction that the Buddha was the first prophet of this Religion of Science. In his youth, Suzuki greatly admired Carus, and his translation of Carus’s *Gospel of Buddha* became a leading Buddhist textbook in Japan—even the clergy were studying it! So here’s a case in which a Western and non-Buddhist reading of Buddhism came to influence its Asian expression in a way that appealed to later Westerners. In other words, part of Buddhism’s appeal in the West was that the Buddhism we were seeing had already been cast in a Western mold.

Buddhists, like Christians, have had little choice but to approach their tradition selectively. Zen Buddhists, say, give preference to certain texts and commentaries, and they do this very differently from the way Theravada Buddhists or Pure Land Buddhists do. My concern is not with the selectivity of those who read Buddhism as a rationalist and scientific religion—it is perfectly understandable given the world in which we live. It is really not a question of misreading. It is a question of what gets lost in the process.

Can you give me an example of what gets lost? Well, let me back up a moment. In order to make Buddhism compatible with science, Buddhist modernism, it seems to me, accepts a Cartesian dualistic understanding of the world. In other words, you draw a metaphysical line through the world: there’s the immaterial, spiritual world of mind on the one hand, which is the proper domain of religion, and there’s the physical or material world on the other, a world governed by mechanistic laws, which is the domain of science. Once you accept this picture of the world, religion is compatible with science only insofar as it is relegated to the realm of inner experience. Religion, understood this way, has no purchase in the empirical world. Ritual has value only indirectly—as a way to bring about psychological change. Look at how suspicious many Western Buddhists are of religious ritual. And when we downplay ritual, we risk weakening our bonds to community and tradition. That’s a pretty major loss.

I suspect that most Buddhist teachers throughout history would have found this Cartesian view of the world pretty weird. In discarding everything that doesn’t fit with our modern view, we compromise the tradition’s capacity to critique this modern view. Buddhism developed in a very different historical and cultural context from our own. Traditional Buddhist epistemology, for example, simply does not accept the Cartesian notion of an insurmountable gap between mind and matter. Most Buddhist philosophies hold that mind and object arise interdependently, so there is no easy way to separate one’s understanding of the world from the world itself.

What sort of critique of the scientific view might Buddhism otherwise offer? The naturalistic stance—the idea that there is an independent insentient world out there governed by scientific laws and impersonal processes—is ultimately a human construct, a powerful and effective human construct, but a construct

nonetheless. This is not to deny the power of science, but it does call into question the way we approach scientific knowledge. Of course, there are many philosophers, scientists, and historians of science who have made a similar point. But Buddhism has its own insights and perspectives to offer. In other words, when we engage seriously with the Buddhist tradition we learn other ways of construing the world, other stories we can tell about the way things are, and these can be cogent, coherent, and compelling in their own way. This is not to argue for a naive acceptance of Buddhist epistemology and cosmology. But we won't see what Buddhism has to offer if, at the outset, we twist it out of shape to make it conform to contemporary norms.

The second point—that what Buddhism is really about is the individual's spiritual experience and not religious institutions, beliefs, doctrines, or rituals—is an assumption so deeply ingrained in Buddhist practice in the West that I think many would question whether it is, on Buddhist grounds, open to critique at all. I certainly don't think that personal experience, meditation, spirituality, and the like are unimportant or that they have no place in Buddhism. The Buddha, after all, attained enlightenment while meditating under the Bodhi tree. My concern is with how Buddhist modernism has isolated meditation from the context of the whole of Buddhist religious life. So much of what was once considered integral to the tradition has been abandoned in this rush to celebrate meditation or mindfulness or personal transformation or mystical experience as the *sine qua non* of Buddhism. Again, it's really not a question of right or wrong. It is a question of what gets lost.

As I mentioned, the Buddhist modernists were influenced by Protestant thinkers who construed religion as a matter of inner experience. To translate Buddhist experience into terms Westerners could grasp, D. T. Suzuki borrowed from a number of Western sources, including the philosopher William James. Suzuki was fascinated by James's notion of religious experience as a kind of pure, direct experience that is unmediated by one's cultural or religious formation. Suzuki and other modernists argued that *satori*—the sudden experience of an enlightened state—was the unmediated experience to which James referred, and that this experience was not only the essence of Buddhism but the essence of all religion. By insisting that some specific, repeatable, ineffable experience is at the very core of the Buddhist tradition, they end up essentializing Buddhism.

How does this idea—that Buddhism points to an essential, experiential truth beyond Buddhism—become a problem? I think there are several problems. For one thing, many Buddhist texts and teachers argue that if Buddhism is about anything, it's about critiquing essences! There is also a kind of arrogance in claiming that Buddhism is not so much a religion as it is the path to the truth behind all religions. In other words, when Suzuki and other contemporary Buddhist teachers argue that all religions emerge from and point toward a single truth, they also imply that Buddhism, properly understood, is the most direct expression of that truth. I have been present at any number of Buddhist-Christian "dialogues" in which Buddhist teachers lecture respected Christian leaders about the ultimate meaning or essence of Christianity, which strikes me as arrogant, to say the least.

Anyway, this emphasis on a single determinative experience has been very influential in Buddhism's development in the West. For example, the Japanese Zen master Hakuun Yasutani [1885–1973] was a teacher to some of the most significant teachers in the West, including Philip Kapleau Roshi, Taizan Maezumi Roshi, Robert Aitken Roshi, and Eido Shimano Roshi. Yasutani was famous for his overriding emphasis on *kensho*, which means much the same thing as *satori*. In Japan he was a marginal figure, pretty much ignored by Soto and Rinzai masters. But in the West, largely because of the work of his disciples, his approach to Zen and his emphasis on *kensho* became pivotal. Similarly, if you practice Vipassana (insight) meditation in America, chances are good that you are using techniques established by Mahasi Sayadaw or U Ba Khin, two twentieth-century Burmese meditation teachers. Yet these two teachers were controversial within the Theravada world precisely because of the emphasis they placed on the rapid attainment of experiential states, especially *sotapatti*, or "stream entry." *Sotapatti*, like *kensho* or *satori*, was understood as a sudden, determinative, and radically transformative experience—a glimpse of nirvana.

Unfortunately, these experiences look clearer in theory than they do in real life, where meditation masters spend no small amount of time arguing over what constitutes such experiences, who really has had them, who is genuinely qualified to judge such things, whose method leads to the authentic experience, and whose leads to some ersatz version, and so forth. It is significant that Yasutani Roshi, Mahasi Sayadaw, and U Ba Khin were all criticized by many of their peers for offering up a "quick fix" version of Buddhism. But these controversies are not really the point. I think it's one thing to view meditation as a serious religious discipline that can help overcome craving and attachment. This approach is perfectly consistent with many Buddhist teachings. But that is quite different from viewing meditation as the be-all and end-all of Buddhism, and it is also different from seeing meditation in utilitarian terms—as a means to bring about

an experience, such as kensho or sotapatti, that will instantly transform the whole of one's existence. Buddhism, like life, isn't that simple. I think many American teachers and practitioners have begun to appreciate this, yet old habits die hard.

But to get back to your point, what gets lost when primacy is given to individual spiritual experience? The Sangha gets lost! The community gets lost. Buddhism has what it calls its Three Treasures: the Buddha, the Dharma, or his teaching, and the Sangha, or the religious community. Throughout history, each of these has been interpreted in various ways, but the idea that one of them might not be that important—it would never fly. But if you view Buddhism as a matter of inner experience, you downplay its corporate dimension, those traditional resources that serve to deepen and extend the bonds of community and tradition.

Today, you often hear people describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” What they mean, I think, is that they care deeply about their inner spiritual and psychological lives, but they are not particularly interested in an affiliation with a religious tradition or institution. Buddhist modernism provides a perspective that not only facilitates this sort of appropriation of Buddhism but makes it desirable.

I think this deep suspicion of religious institutions is understandable but also misguided. The organized rule-bound and tradition-bound institution of the sangha provides a framework that, at least ideally, helps to efface egocentrism. The sangha literally embodies the Buddhist tradition; it transcends the self-concerns of any individual, especially the concerns that arise from placing our inner life at the center of the universe. So we must ask whether Buddhism, when practiced without the ties of community and tradition, instead of mitigating our tendency toward narcissism, actually feeds it.

Historically, the authority of Buddhist teachers was conferred and mediated by the institution of the sangha, specifically the ordained community, which worked on a more or less strict system of seniority. Of course, individuals often specialized in a particular domain—scriptural exegesis, liturgical practice, meditation, and so forth—and some would be recognized for their particular areas of mastery. But the general idea was that before you could claim to represent the dharma, you had to thoroughly imbibe and participate in the life of the institution to which the dharma had been entrusted. But if institutions don't matter, if basic knowledge and understanding of scripture don't matter, and if Buddhism is reduced to an inner experience, however this might be construed, then authority becomes a matter of personal charisma. Lacking the support and the checks and balances that are part of a strong community life, the authority and prominence of any particular teacher, whether by choice or necessity, is based largely on his or her skill as an entrepreneur. In short, teachers are forced to market, however tacitly, their own enlightenment. And this is precisely the situation with so many teachers in America. Living as we do in a market economy, I think this sort of entrepreneurial model demands scrutiny, at the very least.

The religious historian Elaine Pagels has spoken of how religious practitioners adopt certain practices and beliefs selectively and reinterpret texts in what she calls a process of “creative misreading.” Granted, this might be done unconsciously, even perniciously, but might it not also be a necessary strategy for adapting a tradition, in this case Buddhism, to the contingencies of time and place? Yes, I think that's a very valid point. And Buddhist history supports it.

When Buddhism arrived in China in the first and second centuries of the common era, the early Chinese Buddhists translated the scriptures using terms that were familiar to them, often using Daoist language for Sanskrit terms that had no Chinese equivalent. One of my favorite examples is the Sanskrit term tathata, or “suchness,” a word that refers to the natural “empty” state of things—the way things really are. The Chinese translated tathata with the cosmological term benwu, which means “original non-being,” and this gave the Buddhist concept a noticeably Daoist twist. The use of Daoist terminology made Indian Buddhist texts approachable and meaningful to members of the Chinese literary elite. It allowed them to make connections between Buddhism and their own indigenous ways of thinking. This was one reason Buddhism caught on so well.

I think there is a parallel in the way Buddhism is represented to a Western audience. Buddhist ideas are put into terms that are familiar and meaningful to our modern sensibility. Today the language of choice for rendering Buddhist ideas is the language of psychotherapy. And this ends up reinforcing, whether intentionally or not, the notion that Buddhism is basically a means of psychological transformation and that Buddhism is compatible with modern science. This is how we end up with the simplistic notion that Buddhism is a “science of happiness.” But as in China, this may be an unavoidable stage in the transmission of Buddhism.

In China, the translation process evolved over the course of centuries. The Chinese continued to refine their translations of Buddhist texts, and with more reliable translations and commentaries came a deeper engagement with Indian Buddhist thought and practice. It took several centuries before the Chinese could

fully appreciate the breadth and subtleties of Buddhism. This is not to say that they didn't continue to transform the Indian tradition and make it their own, because they certainly did. But the work of transformation went hand in hand with gaining a sophisticated understanding of Buddhism's Indian heritage.

Maybe the lesson from history is that it will take a long time—perhaps centuries—for the West to engage with the Buddhist tradition at a deeper level. Such an engagement will require that we see past the confines of our own historical and cultural situation and gain a greater appreciation of the depth and complexity of the Buddhist heritage. Certainly one impediment to this is the idea that the only thing that matters is meditation and that everything else is just excess baggage.

Before you referred to Buddhism as a critique of all essences, including the idea that there is some essence in Buddhism that is transmitted over time. So, then, what is Buddhism? One way of looking at Buddhism is as a conversation, and this conversation has been going on now for over two thousand years—a long time. Participation in this conversation has always been predicated on having a foundation in various aspects of the tradition—its literature, its philosophy, its rituals, its discipline, and so on. It is a conversation about what it is to be a human being: why we suffer, how we can resolve our suffering, what works, what doesn't, and so forth. These are big issues, and whichever one you choose to look at, you are not going to find a single Buddhist position. There have always been different positions, and these would be debated and argued. But all parties to the debate were presumed to share a common religious culture—a more or less shared world of texts, ideas, practices—without which there could be no real conversation.

This is not to say that there can't be value in reducing Buddhism to a relatively simple set of ideas. It can help make Buddhism accessible to those who are not in a position to engage the complexities of the tradition, especially the monastic tradition. This was the strategy of the "single practice" movements—Nichiren, Jodo Shinshu, and to some extent Soto Zen—in medieval Japan. But when you do this, you run the risk of ending up rather narrow and sectarian, because if you've got the essence, and it's not the same as the essence the guy down the street has—well, you don't really have much to talk about, do you?

In time North American Buddhists may see the value in entering more fully into the Buddhist conversation. But that means acquiring the necessary skills and experience. You don't just jump in and get answers right away. Rather, you are confronted with many answers that generate new sets of questions and perspectives. But it is important, I think, that we keep the conversation going here. It opens one up to dramatically different ways of understanding the world and our place in it. Through our participation we help shape the conversation, and the conversation, in turn, shapes us. To abandon it would be to lose something precious.

Andrew Cooper is Tricycle's features editor.

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