

Tumblr Buddhism
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Anyone who has read the comments section on practically anything online has seen what a divisive and terrifying place the internet can be. Willful ignorance and unnecessary vitriol seem to be ubiquitous. However, the internet has the potential to be a great tool for building bridges, allowing the possibility of access to parts of the world that most of us will never actually set foot in. We can learn about different areas of the world that we have previously made into some form of “other,” whether exoticized, barbarized, dehumanized, etc. Generations before may have been unable or unwilling to enter into a dialogue, but remote corners of the Earth and the voices who inhabit them become more accessible every day. The tradition of Buddhism is so often misunderstood and misrepresented in America and Europe, part of which stems from the fact that Buddhism comes out of many different countries and contexts and has a lot more variety than most Westerners think. We have to understand historical contexts, cultural differences between Buddhism, and the actual needs, wants, and goals of Buddhists to have a working dynamic between people.

Because of our history of colonialism, America and the “West” have put themselves at odds with Buddhist societies, making Eastern countries into an exotic “Other.” Yet even as we have oppressed and harmed these cultures in various ways, we have a checkered history of appropriating various parts of Buddhism (think yoga and prayer flags sold mass market as remnants of this today) without understanding the actual culture we have taken these things from. In this essay, I will discuss some problematic aspects and examples of how Buddhism is represented online, specifically through the website Tumblr, as well as some positive ways to affirm actual Buddhists and give them an outlet to speak for themselves. Finally, I will address how far a cultural understanding through media like Tumblr can actually go, considering the socio-cultural differences inherent between Eastern Buddhist and American/European cultures.

There are two important terms we need to understand before diving in, which I will do my best to define: Tumblr and Buddhism. Tumblr is a microblogging website, meaning most people use the site to post short, frequent additions to their blog in various formats. From the site itself, “Tumblr lets you effortlessly share anything. Post text, photos, quotes, links, music, and videos from your browser, phone, desktop, email or wherever you happen to be,” (“About”). Tumblr tends to be seen on the Internet as only a cultivator of ‘memes’ and a hotbed of so-called social justice warriors (read: people who care about the state of our world and having actual respect for other human beings, despite the negative connotations this phrase has come to have among Men’s Rights Activists and the like). However, the site can be used to circulate information from a variety of perspectives on many different topics.

Buddhism is a bit more complicated, seeing as the practice is seen in many forms in an array of cultures. A quick look at “A Five-Minute Introduction” on buddhanet.net finds a short and sweet answer to the question: what is Buddhism? “Buddhism is a religion to about 300 million people around the world. The word comes from 'budhi', 'to awaken'. It has its origins about 2,500 years ago when Siddhartha Gotama, known as the Buddha, was himself awakened (enlightened) at the age of 35.”¹ According to Richard Gard, Buddhism is that which “concerns

¹ White, Brian. "A Five Minute Introduction." *A Basic Buddhism Guide*. Buddhanet, 1996. Web. 27 Apr. 2016.

the life, here and now, of each sentient being and interrelatedly all of existence.”² Most people who live in the West cannot understand culturally or conceptually what it is truly like to be a Buddhist because of the way that language and culture structures the world differently in different backgrounds. As Gard asserts, “most Westerners or non-Buddhists tend to view and define Buddhism as a philosophy... [b]ut ‘philosophy’ and ‘religion’ are primarily Western concepts which have had various meanings in the course of Western thought... they should not be used contradistinguishably to dichotomize the essential unity of Buddhist thought and practice.”³ Of course, it is important to listen openly to how people define themselves. There is a tumblr user, “taekaiyoon”, who is an indigenous Buddhist. One of their text posts says “Buddhism is not only a religion, but a culture, heritage, ethnicity. Buddha is not a fucking accessory or symbol for just spiritual things, Buddha is more than that...”⁴ A lack of understanding and openness about this concept is obvious in many forms of media, including Tumblr.

The cultural appropriation present in some parts of Tumblr is not the same as cultural appreciation. There is a difference between thinking that another culture is interesting, and taking in parts of that culture for your own use without considering the effects that these forms of appropriation have. Susan Scafidi, author of *Who Owns Culture? Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law* defined cultural appropriation like this: “Taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else's culture without permission. This can include unauthorized use of another culture's dance, dress, music, language, folklore, cuisine, traditional medicine, religious symbols, etc. It's most likely to be harmful when the source community is a minority group that has been oppressed or exploited in other ways or when the object of appropriation is particularly sensitive, e.g. sacred objects.”⁵ Thus, the appropriation of the Eastern religions is not appreciation because of the history of globalization and colonialism that have been incredibly harmful to the areas where these religions come from.

I always go back to a modern day classic: Tim Burton's *A Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993) when thinking about cultural appropriation. Jack Skeleton goes to Christmastown and sees a new way of celebration and of looking at the world, and he likes it. So, he goes back to Halloweentown and brings the culture of Christmastown with him, spreading it through his own land. Then, he tries to celebrate the holiday, Christmas, by acting as Santa Claus and giving gifts. The problem, of course, is that Jack didn't understand the cultural context of Christmas, he wasn't a resident of Christmas town, and he couldn't celebrate properly. Instead, he gave horrifying Halloween-y gifts and scared children all over the world (and kidnapped Santa Claus, probably giving the old man PTSD). He ruined Christmas, and all because he tried to take a culture that was not his to take and that he could not understand, especially without really trying to understand or asking for permission from the people existing in that culture.

² Gard, Richard A. *Buddhism*. New York: G. Braziller, 1961. Print. Page 14.

³ Gard, Richard A. *Buddhism*. New York: G. Braziller, 1961. Print. Page 14.

⁴ taekaiyoon. “Buddhism is not only a religion, but a...” *eindre*. February 2016. Tumblr.

⁵ Baker, K. J. (2012, November 13). A Much-Needed Primer on Cultural Appropriation. Retrieved April 28, 2016, from <http://jezebel.com/5959698/a-much-needed-primer-on-cultural-appropriation>

One Tumblr user, who clearly did not understand the metaphor of *A Nightmare Before Christmas*, goes by the URL “gypsy-kiss.” She is a tumblr user that I stumbled upon when I searched the Buddha tag. The first picture of hers that came up was a white girl with dreads meditating, surrounded by tapestries. The tags on the picture included #hippie, #buddha, #zen, #buddhism, etc. I went to her blog, and other things that I found included pictures of the zodiac, crystal balls, a ouija board, various paintings depicting aspects of hinduism, crystals, wiccan culture, images of the Buddha, pictures of “hippies” chilling outside-- all of whom were white people with dreads, henna artwork (which is a traditionally Indian, Arabic, and African art), and a “gypsy” caravan. Much of her tumblr is clearly appropriating various parts of cultures all around the world, a certain amalgam of different religions that seems to have become representative of American society’s mainstream hippie culture.

There is so much going on in this blog that one almost does not know where to start. Perhaps the appropriation of dreads in many posts by white Americans of European descent, which has been coming up lately in the discussion of various feminist and activist groups. I do not feel the need to repeat the entire position, but a quick overview may be in order. Those classified as black in the dominant discourse, those who have been so violently oppressed and othered in a white supremacist society, used dreads, which have a deeply cultural history in America and the world. Here, dreads can operate and have been seen as a sign of African American revolution (just existence as oneself is revolutionary) and brother/sisterhood-- a representation of one’s roots.⁶ Even in today’s world I have heard dreads called disgusting, dirty, ugly; I know these demeaning remarks have a deeply racist history rooted in undermining black power. However, white “hippies” take over the hairdo and suddenly it’s beautiful and cool. I googled “pretty dreads” and fourteen white women and two black women were shown. On the other hand, google “ugly dreads” and the first page will show sixteen black people (mostly men), and four white people pop up. What does this elucidate? The situations are different, of course, but the attitudes and the practices which come with this kind of mindset are comparable.

People in a position of power over another group of people do not get to take something from that group context free. There are deep cultural backgrounds that have very specific meanings, and they can not just be removed from a certain context and put somewhere else without a second thought, because there are certain repercussions. It is just the same as companies like Hollister using young white women in Native American head gear in their advertising campaigns. In many native societies, warbonnets represent an honor comparable to the Purple Heart, an award for outstanding bravery in war⁷, and people who are not Native American should not just be wearing them around for fun (or especially for the gain of white people capitalising on the Native Americans who have suffered so much in this country). Now the situation with the cultural appropriation of Buddhism is different, of course. However, the appropriation of different cultures are related through the Western mindset clear in dominant discourses, of “we can take whatever we want with no repercussions.”

On the other hand, Tumblr can be useful for spreading awareness in a non-appropriative way. The tumblr user everyday dhamma is one example of this. To understand the meaning of

⁶ Dread History: The African Diaspora, Ethiopianism, and Rastafari. (n.d.). Retrieved June 02, 2016, from <http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/migrations/rasta/rasessay.html>

⁷ Native American Headdresses: Facts for Kids. (2015). Retrieved June 02, 2016, from <http://www.native-languages.org/headdresses.htm>

the username, we can look at the writing of Theravadin monk and scholar Walpola Rahula, who wrote that "there is no term in Buddhist terminology wider than dhamma [also written as dharma]. It includes not only the conditioned things and states, but also the non-conditioned, the Absolute Nirvana. There is nothing in the universe or outside, good or bad, conditioned or non-conditioned, relative or absolute, which is not included in this term."⁸ It is often also understood to mean the collective teachings of the Buddha. This Tumblr user exclusively posts quotes, mostly from prominent Buddhist thinkers such as Ajahn Chah, Chogyam Trungpa, Ajahn Sumedho, Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche, the 14th Dalai Lama,⁹ and Mingyur Rinpoche, as well as a few influential non-indigenous Buddhists like bell hooks⁹ and Alan Watts¹⁰ -- who, while not Buddhist, genuinely study the practice of Buddhism with an understanding of cultural contexts and who do not claim the title of Buddhist for themselves.

What is important here is that even though Mingyur Rinpoche himself is not using tumblr to spread his message, his words are still being heard. Without actively doing so, all of the people who are quoted on tumblr are given a platform to speak and their ideas are being heard. As the 14th Dalai Lama said, "Do not try to use what you learn from Buddhism to be a Buddhist; use it to be a better whatever-you-already-are."¹¹ This is integral to understanding the difference between appropriation and appreciation. The people who are mostly running these blogs do not purport to be Buddhist. They likely do not come from and can never fully understand the cultural contexts of Buddhism, just like Watts and hooks. However, the quotes that are being shared, gems of Buddhist wisdom along with other things, are helpful in reminding people of all cultures to keep certain ideas and practices in mind in our everyday lives, as well as allowing a bridge between cultures and cultural ideas. We can take insight from Buddhism and learn from wise teachers without appropriating the surrounding cultures, and that's more like what the best (not actually Buddhist) blogs are doing.

In *Buddhist Ethics*, the author says that in Buddhism, "to take advantage of life's leisure and endowments upon approaching the Buddha's teaching, the source of all happiness and wellbeing, first find and then follow a spiritual guide."¹² Four groups of people can be considered spiritual guides: ordinary human beings, bodhisattvas [the Mahayana consider bodhisattvas to be beings who do not go on to the final state of transcendence in order to pass knowledge on to the less wise¹³], the manifest dimension of a Buddha, and the enjoyment dimension of a Buddha,¹⁴ and they correlate to the stages that a Buddhist practitioner goes

⁸ Walpola Rahula. *What the Buddha Taught*. Grove Press, 1974. Print. Page 58.

⁹Yancy, G., & Hooks, B. (2016, December 10). Bell hooks: Buddhism, the Beats and Loving Blackness. Retrieved May 13, 2016, from http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/12/10/bell-hooks-buddhism-the-beats-and-loving-blackness/?_r=1

¹⁰ About Alan Watts. (2016). Retrieved June 02, 2016, from <http://www.alanwatts.org/>

¹¹ Harderwijk, R. (2015, July 19). View on Buddhism: (Tibetan) Buddhist practice and philosophy. Retrieved May 25, 2016, from <http://viewonbuddhism.org/>

¹² Tayé, Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro. *Buddhist Ethics*. Trans. International Translation Committee. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1998. Print. Page 39.

¹³ "Buddhist Deities: Bodhisattvas of Compassion." *Buddhist Deities*. Buddhnet, 2008. Web. 19 Apr. 2016.

¹⁴ Tayé, Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro. *Buddhist Ethics*. Page 42.

through on their journey. This is key, for only “when the spiritual guide has qualities superior to ours [can we] excel and attain the desired supreme goal.”¹⁵ From what I’ve seen on tumblr, the only possible level that most blogs achieve is the first type, which corresponds to the first level of learning. Thus the people who run these blogs are “ordinary human beings,” who may be only slightly more learned in the ideals and practices of Buddhism than a random tumblr user who happens to stumble upon a Buddhist-oriented blog (although I wouldn’t deny the possibility of a bodhisattva fulfilling their mission to help the uneducated find understanding in Buddha through an online site like Tumblr).

There is another issue that needs to be considered when talking about multiple and fundamentally different ways of culturally constructing social reality. Americans have been talking about this since at least 1893¹⁶, wondering if “Buddhism, with its conceptions of *anatman* (no-self), *anitya* (impermanence), and *maya* (illusion), [can] find a home in a culture that has historically privileged individuality, Manifest Destiny, and realism?”¹⁷ The history of Buddhism in America goes back to the arrival of the first Japanese immigrants, who settled in the U.S. in the 1870’s and started the first Buddhist Churches of America.¹⁸ Since those days, Buddhism has been present in the U.S. through “immigrants committed to it as a way of life and among native-born Americans fascinated by Buddhism’s traditions and practices”¹⁹ People native to the U.S. necessarily approach Buddhism from a different perspective than Asian-American immigrants because “both their understanding of religion and their sense of self are usually quite different.”²⁰ What does this mean for the practice of Buddhism, online or not, in America?

Kitterman, in his chapter “Identity Theft,” argues that Buddhism can not be truly practiced in America because the fundamental core of Buddhist thought can not exist within America’s central tenets, largely guided by the rules of global capitalism and postmodern thought.²¹ “America can be seen as an increasingly strange place to nourish Buddhism because America at the present moment is where late capitalism is reaching a kind of crisis by producing a simulation of selfhood diametrically opposed to the Buddhist search for an authentic, empty self.”²² He argues that even though theoretically Buddhists in America could adapt their forms of practice to deal with different modes of thought without changing core beliefs, the problem is that the separation between core and surroundings is crumbling.²³ In other words, it will be impossible to keep the core of Buddhism in American society.

¹⁵ Tayé, Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro. *Buddhist Ethics*. Page 41.

¹⁶ Kitterman, J. (2010). Identity Theft: Simulating Nirvana in Postmodern America. In G. Storhoff & J. Whalen-Bridge (Eds.), *American Buddhism as a way of life* (pp. 125-147). Albany: State University of New York Press. Pg. 125.

¹⁷ Kitterman. Pg 125.

¹⁸ Stout, Daniel A., ed. *Encyclopedia of Religion, Communication and Media*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Pg 54.

¹⁹ Stout. Pg 54.

²⁰ Stout. Pg 55.

²¹ Kitterman. Pg 126.

²² Kitterman. Pg 127.

²³ Kitterman. Pg 127.

Kitterman thus posits that Buddhism, especially in societies driven by the demands of global capitalism, such as America, is in danger of becoming another product.²⁴ One way that this happens can easily be seen in the cultural appropriation of the image of the Buddha, which can be found on any variety of products in shops that have nothing to do with cultural Buddhists, nor do they provide any benefit for actual Buddhists, economically or otherwise. The profits from items such as the “Lucky Brand Buddha Graphic Tank Top”²⁵ found in Macy’s for a price of \$39.50 USD go straight to American capitalists. Look in any store along the lines of Mexicali Blues and you can see rampant cultural appropriation for capitalist gain, through fabrics, clothing, prayer flags, statuettes, etc., items that hold significance for actual Buddhists, but are being sold to people with no historical connection to Buddhism-- just as a fashion statement and/or to fit into today’s young “counter culture” of mainstream so-called hippies.

Late stage capitalism is not the only movement that could endanger the core of Buddhist practice, though, in Kitterman’s thinking (though Buddhism has survived a lot and adapted in many ways). “Technology can also supply a “bonus of pleasure” that stimulates the *jouissance* that the individual would feel in recovering some of the lost feeling of oneness that he owned before becoming individuated.”²⁶ He says that we are replacing one ideological bliss (religion, which Kitterman’s writing implies is purer, ‘better’), with another bliss to be found through the “consumption of products.”²⁷ His position is clear: capitalism and Buddhism can not coexist in one person, because of the inherent individualistic and consumptive world-view of capitalist society. What does this mean for Buddhism on the internet? Theoretically, Kitterman’s outlook could mean nothing. Native Buddhists using the internet do exist; Mingyur Rinpoche and the Dalai Lama, among others, have very strong internet presences which they use for a variety of purposes (i.e., worship, spreading information, making cultural objects available for purchase, etc). However, the “study and practice” of Buddhism on the internet and on websites like Tumblr have been and will continue to be done far too often by people who are not culturally Buddhist and can not truly practice or represent Buddhism, and this is something that we need to address and understand.

Online micro-blogging platforms like Tumblr can, like anything, be used in different ways and with different results. There are harmful and appropriative ways of representing Buddhism, but there are also ways to educate people who otherwise would not have this kind of access to information about other ideas and cultures. Providing an outlet for quotes and ideas from Buddhist thinkers, while crediting them and understanding their contexts in comparison to the user’s own, is a good way to create inter-cultural understanding and perhaps even make us better all-around people. The Internet can also serve as a megaphone for indigenous Buddhist voices, allowing opinions and definition to come from within a community rather than the outside. This provides the opportunity for shining a light on differences between traditions, as well as providing an outlet for critique, both within and without Buddhist circles. However, stealing the cultural celebrations, motifs, artifacts, etc, of another culture, without understanding or permission, is actively harmful and has real world implications. Moreover, considering the

²⁴ Kitterman. Pg 130.

²⁵ Macys. Lucky Brand Buddha Graphic Tank Top. Retrieved April 23, 2016, from <http://www1.macys.com/shop/product/lucky-brand-buddha-graphic-tank-top?ID=2532031>

²⁶ Kitterman. Pg 130.

²⁷ Kitterman. Pg 130.

differing perceptions of the individual and the world in various cultures, we have to be careful of what aspects of Buddhism we try to represent. We have to be careful and wise and open to critique when thinking and talking about matters like this.