



Dharma on Wheels: A Youth's Bicycling Pilgrimage around the Globe

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Abstract

For millennia, going on a prayerful pilgrimage has been an essential part of spiritual cultivation. Buddha himself might have been the best example, leaving behind the palace of comfort in search for the ultimate truth and to end suffering for all. The 7th Century monk Xuan Zang is perhaps the most recognized for his 17-year overland journey from China to India and back, bringing authentic sutras to China and preserving a comprehensive written record of South Asia. Master Xu Yun (Empty Cloud), one of the most respected Chan patriarchs in recent Chinese history, made a three-steps-one-bow pilgrimage for two years to repay the debt of gratitude for his parents. The aim of this paper is to express Dhamma on wheel through exploring a youth's bicycling pilgrimage around the Globe.

Keywords: Dhamma Wheel, Bicycle, World Tour.

Introduction

For millennia, going on a prayerful pilgrimage has been an essential part of spiritual cultivation. Buddha himself might have been the best example, leaving behind the palace of comfort in search for the ultimate truth and to end suffering for all. The 7th Century monk Xuan Zang is perhaps the most recognized for his 17-year overland journey from China to India and back, bringing authentic sutras to China and preserving a comprehensive written record of South Asia. Master Xu Yun (Empty Cloud), one of the most respected Chan patriarchs in recent Chinese history, made a three-steps-one-bow pilgrimage for two years to repay the debt of gratitude for his parents. In the 1970s, two American monks, Rev. Heng Sure and Heng Chau, undertook a two and a half years bowing pilgrimage up the Californian coast as a prayer for world peace.

In today's global and digital world where one could sit on the couch and tour the ancient Nalanda University through a virtual reality headset, I feel deeply grateful to the lineage of pilgrims for inspiring me to go on a slow journey, bicycling from California to China via America and Eurasia.

In early 2015, two years after college and into my consulting career in San Francisco, I received an inner calling to "return home". There is an ecological and spiritual awakening among the young generation worldwide. Mother Earth is asking me to go back to China and join in the regeneration from there. After one year of inner preparations, on Feb 29th, 2016, I embarked on an open-ended — and open-hearted — pilgrimage, bicycling East from US back home to China. In the two years since, the journey has led me across North America, Europe and Asia, through 16 countries and over 10,000 kilometers.

Every day, I cycle on small roads through towns and villages while listening to Scriptures (via audiobook), to nature, or to my own mind. In the evening, similar to going on alms rounds, I knock on the doors of strangers to ask if I may camp next to their house. On average, one in five families say "yes", and those who do often invite me to join them for dinner, or even sleep inside the house. So far, I have knocked on over 1,000 doors, and stayed with 200 different families.

Along the way, I try to bring mindfulness and kindness into small interactions. I maintain six vows: no killing, no stealing, no lustfulness, no intoxicants, no meat-eating, and no profit-seeking. I visit monasteries, meditation centers, intentional communities, to live and practice with them for a few days or weeks. I try to enter each stranger's home as a temple, and pay homage to the divine in ordinary people. I try to meditate at least one hour a day,

and dedicate the merits to my hosts and all sentient beings. I often fail in trying, and try to keep trying. In essence, the pilgrimage is an attempt to take the “monastery” with me on the bicycle, and use the physical journey as a way to deepen into stillness and service.

The pilgrimage has been a most empowering and humbling (re)education. Dharma has come alive through lived experiences. Faith has deepened, vows have taken roots, and mindfulness is growing slowly but surely. Here I would like to share some selected journal entries from the road — “Dharma on wheels”.

True Dana

2016.04 | California, USA

When I have no things left to give, true giving finally begins.

It is a strong Chinese and family tradition that we bring physical gifts everywhere we go. It is an offering of gratitude, and a show of respect and affection. The gift-giving also helps to relieve my sense of indebtedness to so many people whom I could never repay.

On this journey, however, I literally have no extra things to spare, given the minimalist packing principle. And, I am receiving so many blessings from so many people that I could not possibly carry enough gifts even if I stuff my panniers full with trinkets.

At first, I felt uneasy when I show up empty-handed. I was at a loss, deprived of gift-giving as an easy way out of the discomfort of overwhelming gratitude. The discomfort forced upon me this question: what can you give, when you have no things to give?

The answer soon became apparent: I can give of myself. I can listen deeply. I can be fully present. I can be truly curious and non-judgmental. I can create soulful conversations, and hold a space of non-reaction. I can offer my silent prayers, and send out loving kindness in meditation. I can let go of the “I”, the nervous ego, so that something greater could pour through.

I used to not have faith in the power of these nonphysical gifts. They didn’t seem “real”. I didn’t believe that I was good enough at offering them. I was doubtful that those around me would “pick up the signal”. But now, after trying and keeping trying, my faith is growing daily in the power of giving ourselves without the self, and in people’s innate ability to receive and value these gifts -- the only true gifts.

I am reminded of the words of a dear friend and teacher, Nipun, “Service doesn’t start when you have something to give; it blossoms naturally when you have nothing left to take.”

Alms Bowl vs. Begging Bowl

2016.08 | Shanghai, China

I heard Rev. Heng Sure described the difference between a monk’s alms bowl and a beggar’s begging bowl. When a monk goes on alms rounds, he is making himself available to be on the receiving end, should anyone care to practice generosity. There is no attachment to the outcome of each knocking of the door, as the monk offers the same silent prayer of well wishes regardless of the hosts’ response.

It appears my knocking on strangers door is also an alms round -- not for food, but for lodging and genuine human connections.

For each family I approach, I would try my best to silently wish them well, no matter how they respond to my (unusual) request to sleep in their yard. Many of the families who hosted me would later say things like, “We feel so blessed that you have chosen to come to our house.” It is not me who make them feel special; what has blessed them is the very opportunity for them to practice generosity and kindness to strangers -- to be their highest self. And they have chosen to say Yes.

People are hungry for an opportunity to be generous and kind. In our hyper-digital, individual, and guarded age, it has become a rare treat to interact with flesh-and-bone strangers in a meaningful way. We don’t know it consciously, but we are all thirsty for the ancient ritual of welcoming strangers into our home and break bread together. It is the inexhaustible wealth of a pilgrim to offer these gifts to people he meets along the way. He is there, fully open, vulnerable, and trusting.

Once we’ve gotten more familiar with each other, many of my hosts would also share their inner debate when I first showed up at their door. They would always hear two voices: one of suspicion and separation (thanks to mass media), and another of trust and belonging. Then, “the good dog would win”, as they remember how someone have extended a helping hand to them many years ago, or someone have been kind to their son during his long voyage in a foreign land. It is a daily testament of the powerful ripple of love. People never forget a genuinely kind act, even decades later. And that kind act continues to gift forward.

On the receiving end of the “alms rounds”, I am nudged to step up and honor my share of the work in this holy exchange. For my hosts, it is a good thing to help a young traveler; but it is of even more joy to support a pilgrim. As the pre-meal contemplation goes, “This offering is the work of love and care. I reflect upon my conduct: have I truly earned my share?”

All Dharmas Are Equal

2017.01 | City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, USA

The Vajra Sutra says, “All dharmas are equal; there is no higher or lower.” Master Hua explains, “Of the 84,000 dharma-doors taught by the Buddha, each and every one of them is the foremost dharma-door. There is no No.2. Why? If a particular dharma-door suits the composition and affinity of the student, then it is No.1. If it is not suitable, then it is not No.1.”

One of Master Hua’s lifelong endeavors is to bring together different lineages within Buddhism, and to build bridges between the world’s religions. At the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas (CTTB), the five major schools of Mahayana Buddhism are equally valued and practices: Chan (meditation), Teaching (sutra studies), Vinaya (precepts), Secret (mantras and esoteric practices), and Pure Land (Buddha recitation).

During my stay there, I got to “sample” each of these dharma-doors briefly, and finally do my “comparison shopping” for the one that suits me most. In the process, I discovered striking similarities underlying many of the seemingly different dharma-doors. It further confirms that “all dharmas originate from the same source”.

For example, in the Amitabha Sutra of the Pure Land school, it says,

“... if there is a good man or a good woman who hears ‘Amitabha’ and holds the name, whether for one day, two days, three, four, five days, six days, as long as seven days, with one heart unconfused, when this person approaches the end of life, before him will appear Amitabha and all the assembly of holy ones. When the end comes, his heart is without inversion; in Amitabha’s Land of Ultimate Bliss he will attain rebirth.”

And compare that to Vipassana meditation. In the Mahasatipatthana Sutta, which is the canonical source of Vipassana technique, it says,

Indeed, monks, whoever practices this fourfold establishing of awareness in this manner for seven years, he may expect one of two results: in this very life highest wisdom or, if a substratum of aggregates remains, the stage of non-returner.

Let alone seven years, monks...

Let alone six years, monks...

Let alone seven months, monks...

Let alone half a month, monks. Should any person practice this fourfold establishing of awareness in this manner for seven days, one of two results may be expected in him: in this very life highest wisdom or, if a substratum of aggregates remains, the stage of non-returner.

In both teachings, the key is to maintain constant mindfulness, to “dwells ardent with awareness and constant thorough understanding of impermanence”, “with one heart unconfused”. In both cases, the fruit is the non-returning stage.

The Chan (or “Zen” in Japanese) meditation is also similar to Vipassana. Vipassana (as taught by S.N. Goenka) uses “bodily sensation” (Vedana) as the object of concentration and the doorway into understanding impermanence, leading into insight. Chan uses the investigation of a “meditation topic” (Hua Tou, such as “Who is mindful of the Buddha?”) as the object of concentration and to activate inherent wisdom. In both techniques, the practice is to maintain moment-to-moment awareness, whether one is walking, sitting, standing, or lying down.

It seems to my untrained eyes that, structurally, the different dharma-doors all follow to core teaching of “morality, concentration, and wisdom”.

Being at CTTB also helps me to bring together the Mahayana and Theravada traditions in my own practice. For me, Mahayana teachings (the Bodhisattva path) provide the “why” -- compassion for all living beings, while the Theravada teachings (the Arahant path) provides the “how” -- a detailed meditation technique to eradicate craving from the depth of mind.

Everyone a Pilgrim

2017.04 | California, USA

Yes, it could be a cliché to say that everyone is a pilgrim. But, it is most humbling to realize how true it actually is. Perhaps more than anything else, the year on the pilgrimage has allowed me to bear witness to (and develop the utmost respect for) everyone's path -- however mundane or chaotic it might seem.

The nature of my travel has afforded me to good fortune to take a brief yet intimate dip into many people's lives in drastically different environments. From the 20-million-dollar mansions in Malibu, California, to rats-infested guest houses in Nepal, from the tranquil silence of Benedictine monks to the bubbly hustle of soccer moms.

After having stayed in so many homes and listened to so many life stories, two things have become clear. **First, nobody has it easy. Second, everyone is trying their best,** consciously or unconsciously, even though at times it might not look or feel like it, to others -- or to themselves.

In many ways, I feel like I have the easy life compared to the householders who have welcomed and hosted me all around the world. I have no family to feed, no diapers to change, no schedules to follow, no mortgage to pay, no leaky pipes to fix, no boss to satisfy, no spouse to consider... The householders don't even get the consolation prize (and spiritual snobbery) of calling themselves a pilgrim.

There was one memorable moment when it hit home. I was sitting in the back of the car of a young mother. She was braving the rush-hour Indian traffic, deftly driving the stick-shift -- all four limbs engaged. Her energetic six-year-old was yelling for her attention. She was practicing patience and compassion with the child. Her phone rang. She picked up the phone in between the frequent shifting of car gears. The phone call added more to her shopping list for an upcoming gathering she was volunteering for. The night before she was hosting a meditation circle in her home (which she has done every week for almost a decade), after which she stayed up late to do her "day job" on the computer...

As I sat in the comfort of the back seat looking through the suffocating smog on the other side of the car window, my heart was filled with awe, respect and tenderness for this dear sister, and all mothers like her, and all people simply "living life" to the best of their ability. No glory, no fanfare, just good-old-fashioned hard work, day in and day out. Life is the real cultivation -- that is where the rubber meets the road.

I guess, the only thing that differentiates a pilgrimage from the “day-to-day” is the mere awareness that you are on a pilgrimage called Life. It is the volition to use the “ordinary life” to cultivate the sublime truth -- an “examined life”, to paraphrase Socrates.

I realize that I have gone on a well-contained pilgrimage so that I could learn to “live life as a pilgrim” later on. A pilgrimage is the rehearsal for real life.

Cultivating within the day-to-day is like changing the airplane engine while flying mid-air. Cultivating on a defined pilgrimage (or in the monastery) is like changing the engine in the airplane hangar -- much easier and safer. But you never know how well the new engine runs unless you start flying.

At the start of two monks’ 800-mile bowing pilgrimage, their teacher Master Hua said to them, “Be the same on the highway as you were in the monastery.” May all pilgrims be the same in “real life” as they are on the pilgrimage.

Bodhisattvas at Home

2017.05 | Inner Mongolia, China

I spent the past decade in the West, thinking that I would learn something new to bring back. Gradually, I realized that I am only returning to the roots. Similarly, in the past years, I’ve bowed to many Bodhisattva statues outside, but upon returning home, I am starting to recognize the living Bodhisattvas at home -- my grandparents.

My grandma always says, “Never do any harm. Don’t do even the smallest evil. And help others according to your ability, whenever you can.” The four grandparents have truly lived these virtues in simple and humble ways. They have remained true during the tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution and social chaos.

Even though they are staunch atheist, I am surprised to discover Buddha statues and images placed at the most dignified -- but out of view -- places in their homes. When I ask them why they places these symbols at home, they brush it off by saying, “Oh, I don’t remember. Maybe your uncle brought it.” But seeing how they have lived a life of virtue and service, I am starting to suspect that they might be Bodhisattvas in disguise :)

On the surface, my grandparents say that they don’t fully understand what I am up to, and worry about my safety. But in my heart, I know that the mission that called me was a direct result of their merits and virtue. I know that the goodness I receive is the fruits of their cultivation and blessings.

So, before we said our final goodbye on this trip, I went down on my knees and sincerely bowed, for the first time in my life, to my grandparents -- the Bodhisattvas at home.

Meditation and Prayer

2017.06 | London, UK

One major difference between Year Two and Year One of the pilgrimage, is the clarity around adhering to the daily hour of meditation. Trishna said to me, “What a gift it would be if you offer these hours of silence to the families that host you along the way.” The thought that I am not just doing it for myself has sustained the daily practice.

During the 12 days of cycle-touring, I was able to keep to two hours of daily meditation on most days, and at least one hour if not. It has made all the difference in reminding me “what this is really all about”. It is about transforming the deepest patterns of the mind. It is about learning to dwell in awareness and prayer. The hour of stillness and loving-kindness in the morning spills over to the rest of the day. My mind was able to more frequently catch itself from negative loops, and to turn instead toward prayer and connection.

Meeting the women behind the world peace prayer has also deepened my appreciation for prayer. Sister Maki shared what she learned from a young age about prayers: “I cannot truly be happy when the world is suffering. My prayer for personal well-being would only be realized if the prayer for world peace is realized. So, no matter what you pray for, we should add a prayer for world peace at the end.”

Indeed! “May Peace Prevail on Earth”!

Be Reconciled From Within

2017.08 | Taize, France

Taize was founded out of a prayer for reconciliation. At the beginning, it was the reconciliation between Protestant and Catholic traditions. It started as a personal longing of Brother Roger. Naturally, it rippled into his work, and widened to reconciliation between nations and people -- all God’s children.

I am called to Taize, also to be reconciled from within, especially to reconcile the teachings of the Buddha and of Jesus within myself.

In the past few years, as my study/practice of Buddha Dharma deepens, I have felt increasingly partial toward Buddha Dharma. I subconsciously believed that other religions are “good but not complete”. Some of the assumptions I hold are:

- Buddha lived and taught longer than Jesus. So Buddha was able to impart more wisdom and benefit more people.
- Buddha did not get himself into violent death. So Buddha is a more skillful teacher.
- Buddha Dharma is the more complete truth. Christianity could fit within Buddhism, but not vice versa. Jesus is perhaps a Bodhisattva. The Abrahamic God looks very much like the Maha Brahma on Level 14 of the 31 Realms of Existence. The Christian heaven is perhaps equivalent to the Pure Land created by Amitabha Buddha.
- Buddhism has inspired much less violence than the Abrahamic religions. Buddhism is more peaceful and suitable for China today.

I have been running away from acknowledging my hidden assumptions, because they undermine my self-image of tolerance and broadmindedness. But slowly, I have come to see that I could not truly embrace other people until I dissolve these biases within my mind. How could I “love my neighbors” when I believe my faith is “more true” and superior than theirs? How could I tell others to be ecumenical and more tolerant while I harbor these hidden biases? I realized that my efforts toward “interfaith harmony” would be hypocritical and feeble if I do not “reconcile from within” first.

Moreover, my Teacher’s very life is a call for reconciliation. Throughout his life of bringing Dharma to the West, Master Hua has always tried to bring together different lineages within Buddhism, and to create harmony between the world’s religions. Master Hua once said to his disciples, “Don’t think that I am bringing Buddhism to the West. I am just bringing humanness back to humanity.” Master Hua has invited Catholic priests to hold Mass at the Buddha Hall at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. He even said to the Catholic cardinal of Taiwan, “You can be a Buddhist among the Catholics, and I a Catholic among the Buddhist.”

As a disciple of Master Hua, I feel inspired to make a good-faith attempt at dissolving my inner biases -- even the subtle favoritism toward Buddhism. I suspect that a Buddhist who

could not authentically imagine himself as a Christian has not really understood the teachings of the Buddha.

So, for the whole week at Taize, I kept praying, “Guide me to enter into Christianity on its own terms, instead of through the lens of Buddhism.” At Taize, the lifelong project of “inner reconciliation” has begun in earnest. The path is long :)

Letting Go of Fixed Views

2017.08 | Plum Village, France

In fact, I had felt much more uncomfortable at Plum Village than at Taize, a Christian monastic community. It is because, at Taize, I had no expectation of what a Christian monastery should be like. I am much more ready to accept the reality with openness and curiosity. Whereas for Buddhism, I have accumulated much (subconscious) assumptions of what a monastery should look like. It turns out that it is easier to reconcile Buddha with Jesus than it is to reconcile “one Buddha” with “another” :)

With the help of discussing with other retreatants and monks, I realized that my discomfort stemmed from existing views about Buddhism. I have equated orthodoxy with faith, austerity with effort, and pain with progress. I have derived a subtle sense of superiority by believing that I am practicing the “pure, rigorous, undiluted” form of Buddhism.

Thay offers 14 Mindfulness Trainings to those who want to ordain in the Order of Interbeing created by him. The second Training is exactly about „non-attachment to views“:

“Aware of the suffering created by attachment to views and wrong perceptions, we are determined to avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. We are committed to learning and practicing non-attachment to views and being open to others’ experiences and insights in order to benefit from the collective wisdom. We are aware that the knowledge we presently possess is not changeless, absolute truth. Insight is revealed through the practice of compassionate listening, deep looking, and letting go of notions rather than through the accumulation of intellectual knowledge. Truth is found in life, and we will observe life within and around us in every moment, ready to learn throughout our lives.”

While at Plum Village, by observing my own reactions, I got a taste of what religious fundamentalists might possibly experience. There is self-righteousness in austerity. The “license” to judge others is almost the consolation prize for self-denial.

Buddha taught that all phenomenon are impermanent, including the face of Dharma. Buddhism has been among the most adaptive religions in history, changing its outer forms to suit the local culture while preserving the inner essence.

When Buddhism came to China, it has gone through hundreds of years of adjustments and adaptation. It has exchanged heavily with Daoism and Confucianism, and has become an integral part of Chinese culture. Thay is continuing this (r)evolutionary legacy in the West.

However, the adaptations are not without risks. Thay is acutely aware of them. I think the greater risk lies in the second or third generation after Thay. The adaptations Thay have made to “Westernize” Buddhism is built on his masterful understanding and practice of the heart of Buddha’s teaching. His scholarship and cultivation lend legitimacy and protection to his daring adaptations. But it seems that none of Thay’s disciples has come close to his stage of realization, thus making further innovations more vulnerable.

Also, by loosening certain cultural restrictions (such as the separation of genders), I wonder if a slippery slope is created. One senior monk at Plum Village also shared with me that he worry the popularity of Plum Village’s retreat programs might entice the community to offer more “activities” and veer away from the core practice of Liberation.

To bring Dharma to the West is hard work. The culture is so different. Master Hua once remarked, “It is easier to make the sun rise in the West than it is to teach Dharma to Westerners.” (Christian missionaries might have expressed similar sentiments in China.)

At Plum Village, Thay has faced similar difficulties in nurturing Western disciples. Western disciples -- even those who have been in robes for 10 or 20 years -- are much more likely to return to lay life. At Plum Village, the most senior monks have an age gap of 40 to 50 years with Thay -- that’s two entire generations. The wonderful abbot is only 29 years old (although he has been a monk since age 14, serving as Thay’s attendant for years). So far as I can see, there is no single monk who could be Thay’s successor.

But, Thay has said, if Buddha were to come to our world again, he might not come as an individual, but as a sangha -- a community of practitioners. I pray for the harmony and strength of the Plum Village sangha.

Meeting Tara: Divine Feminine in Action

2018.02 | Sathira Dhammasathan, Thailand

During the two weeks living inside a nunnery, I am most grateful for experiencing Tara in action, the embodiment of divine feminine.

Of the many spiritual centers I've visited around the world, the vast majority are very masculine. The Vipassana meditation centers (established by Goenka-ji) perhaps epitomize the pure-masculine energy: blank walls, linear and bare interior design, strict discipline, austere practice, not much room for negotiation or creativity, and with male teachers in higher roles of authority. (And it works well for its purposes.) Perhaps because the male dominance is so pervasive in society, I have never noticed it until coming into powerful vortex of feminine energy. And it both thrills and intimidates me to be in it.

For one, I was not expecting to see so many bare-chested female forms upon arrival at a nunnery. There are perhaps hundreds of Tara statues sprinkled around SDS campus, each sitting in her full ease and confidence, serene yet engaged, all-loving yet powerful -- but without a shirt. Seeing a fully confident divine feminine in her natural state somehow really intimidated me. Over the next few days, I tried to look within, and realized it was the wounded masculine within me that was feeling threatened.

The wounded masculine is accustomed to decided when a women should and should not be clothed; he is shocked to have that unconscious control taken away from him. The wounded masculine is accustomed to being around wounded feminine: shy, submissive, inactive; he could not easily adjust to a healthy feminine, equal yet different, in her full force and beauty. The wounded masculine is deep in the illusion that he is masculine only; he is thus both thrilled and confused to remember that he, too, has access to the divine feminine force.

Examples of Tara in action abound in SDS. It is hard to find a straight line in the architecture and garden. The paths are winding. The windows are curved. The concrete building bends -- and has holes in the middle -- to make way for old trees. All the physical infrastructure looks as if it has grown out of moist earth, going with the flow. On one floor, the open terrace tends to accumulate water when it rains. So the nuns have put in a long wavy tank along the edge, so that it becomes a pool after rain. The iconic, twisted trees in SDS are mostly «orphaned» trees. Nearby villagers dump these trees at SDS because they have an unlucky name in Thai («sad tree»). The nuns have taken in these trees, renamed them into something auspicious, and have grown a flourishing mini-forest out of them.

Turning from «hardware» to «software», the Tara presence is even more breathtaking. One day, a group of hundred of us were having a conference session on «climate change» at the UN headquarter in Bangkok. Men in suits with high titles read their printed speeches. When it was Ven. Sansanee's turn, she came down from the podium, and got everyone to stand in a big circle, forming a train of shoulder rubs while singing cute songs about love and kindness. Mind you, there were monks and nuns in the circle, too. She did it without asking for anyone's permission, as if it were the most natural thing to do inside the United Nations hall. The men in suits were stunned, but eventually broke into sheepish smiles and appeared to be enjoying the ticklish shoulder rub offered by the kids behind him.

For our five-day conference (hosted by SDS) on «Inner Dimensions of Climate Change» (organized by the Global Peace Initiative of Women), the organizers were so willing to toss their carefully planned agenda out the window (there was no window, either, as we were sitting in open-air meditation hall with mosquitos and all) to allow for spontaneous offerings and deeper connections not otherwise possible.

At no point was the «divine feminine» explicitly mentioned or imposed, but we witnessed Tara's presence and feminine organizing principles around every corner. The experience inspired me to quietly make a promise to myself to befriend and serve the Tara within and without.

Just as the seated Tara has one leg outstretched, ready to leap into action at any time, so are the nuns ever active, always working and serving. They do not take dinner themselves, but stood by the dinner line to serve us with smiles. The aforementioned 11-year-old nun even walked around us offering mosquito spray with her limited English, while us adult delegates sat relaxed enjoying dinner and conversation. We were deeply humbled to be served by the nuns and young volunteers around the clock. They were my greatest teachers.

Are You a Buddhist?

2018.04 | Inner Mongolia, China

I am not a Buddhist.

I am not a Buddhist, in the same way that I am not a Christian. If I am a Buddhist, then I am also a Christian, and Muslim, etc. Not that either Buddha or Jesus would care, one way or another :) . I have great respect for people sincerely putting their faiths' teaching into practice, but being "religious" is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for living a virtuous life.

But in the eyes of many relatives and friends in China, I must have become a Buddhist, because I am now vegetarian, meditating, and studying Buddhist texts. There is no other available box to put me in. (However, nobody seem to worry that I might end up a cyborg for using computer and smartphone all day long. Perhaps being a cyborg is more familiar and forgivable to today's techno-masses.)

For some (often Buddhists themselves), my becoming "Buddhist" is an encouraging sign that there is one more lost sheep back in the flock. But for most in the older generations, it causes them confusion and worry. Sometimes, the assumption leads them to give me long lectures on how Buddha has got it wrong. (Great opportunity to practice Khanti parami -- patience! Just listen, no arguing...) Out of goodwill, they implore me to eat some meat for health. Out of goodwill, they remind me that it is about time to get a job and get married. Out of goodwill, they worry that I will become a passive "parasite of society" going around begging.

The impression is not entirely the fault of official brainwashing. For too long, the "fake Buddhists" in China have given Dharma a bad reputation. Before the Buddha entered Nirvana, he forewarned against the Dharma-ending age:

"... when the Dharma is about to perish, during the evil age of the five turbidities, the way of demons will flourish. Demonic beings will become shramanas; they will pervert and destroy my teachings. Monastics will wear the garb of laypersons and will prefer handsome clothes. Their precept sashes will be made of multi-colored cloth. They will use intoxicants, eat meat, kill other beings and they will indulge in their desire for flavorful food. They will lack compassion and they will bear hatred and exhibit jealousy even among themselves..."

"Fugitives from the law will seek refuge in my Way, wishing to be shramanas but failing to observe the moral regulations. Monastics will continue to recite the precepts twice a month, but in name alone."

In such time as ours, I am especially grateful for the monastics (and peoples of all religions) who uphold the purity of their faiths by living a moral life. Yet each person has a place in the bigger scheme of things. For my part, at this stage of life, it is perhaps most skillful to not appear "religious" in China, so that I could focus on cultivating the "principle" without getting entangled in the "form". Otherwise, much energy would be expended to just back-paddle myself out of people's (false) perceptions of "Buddhists".

Ready for Home

2018.04 | Inner Mongolia, China

There is clearly a quiet revolution going on in China -- not the sensational kinds favored by media, but a silent yet irreversible awakening of the heart. I hear so many young Chinese (especially those who have studied and lived abroad) sharing the same hopeful observation.

The eco-spiritual awakening in China struck me strongly in 2015 during a short trip home, and beckoned me to return and join in the renaissance.

But I also knew that I was not “ready for home”, because there were aspects of the Chinese society that really bothered me, such as the selfishness, dishonesty, distrust, infighting... I saw these qualities as problems, as uniquely Chinese, and as separate from me; nor was I willing to accept the collective karma of being Chinese. Deadly air pollution and no access to Gmail or Wikipedia -- any takers?

I knew my aversions mostly stemmed from rejecting the inglorious part of myself, and from an attachment to comfort. So, to a large extent, the bicycling pilgrimage around the world is an inner preparation to return home, to see oneness and wholeness.

Master Hua often recites a verse,
Truly recognize your own faults;
Don't discuss the faults of others;
Others' faults are just my own.
Being one with all is Great Compassion.

After the past seven weeks of trial period, I think I am officially ready for home :) People's bad habits no longer trigger me (or only do so for much shorter duration), as I take them as opportunities to turn the light within and purify my own mind. Challenges outside no longer afflict me, as they may be gifts from the gods for me to develop my paramis. I no longer see China's problems as “problems” or as uniquely Chinese. These are just manifested conditions for us to cultivate our compassion and wisdom. Samsara is not to be fixed; we are here to do what's ours to do, nothing more. “The only yardstick to measure one's progress on the path is the equanimity that one has developed”, as Goenka-ji, the Vipassana teacher, often emphasizes.

As I become ready for home, “home” also becomes ready for “me”. In addition to the global family who constantly showers me with their love and blessings, I am especially grateful to my parents. Every day, the three of us meditate together for at least an hour, and have our own “book club” reading and discussing sutras after a vegetarian lunch. I would never have imagined any of this barely two years ago, but slowly have the inkling that my parents and I have been fellow travelers on the spiritual paths for lifetimes, only to come together in this configuration this time around.

Deep bows to all my parents from all lifetimes, which, as they say, include all sentient beings through the entire empty space! May we keep returning home!

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