

Fascination and Appropriation: Readings on the Commercialization of Buddhism

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the present-day cultural appropriations of Buddha and Buddhism and the consumerist avenues that make the misrepresentation of the religion easy. The interventions of new age spiritualism have reduced Buddha idols and other traditions of the religion to mere pieces of décor which has affected significantly, the modern perceptions of Buddhism. Buddha idol with its aesthetic appeal is perceived today as 'cool', consumable and marketable, all of which effectively facades the ongoing defilement of the spiritual symbol. The idea that Buddhist images would reflect and imbibe peace, serenity and inner happiness is the chief strategy that invariably sells all these products and the notion gains momentum in the present age of globalization, which is essentially competitive, tiresome and absurd. However not all Buddhist communities are ready to look over these sacrilegious acts for, countries like Sri Lanka consider it an offence to use Buddhist symbols as an ornament or décor. The popular conception of Buddhism as a calm, secular religion has also contributed to its massive dissemination in the consumer world which reduced it into a commercial product like many other.

KEYWORDS

Buddhism; appropriation; consumerism; misrepresentation; Zen.

Buddhism, a religion and philosophy, with a wide array of traditions, beliefs and spiritual practices, originated in India around 6th and 4th century BCE with the teachings of Buddha born Siddhartha Gautama. Since its origin, the religion spread to much of Asia after which it declined in ancient India during the middle ages. The term Buddha was attributed to Gautama post his enlightenment and has its origin in 'budhi' which means 'to awake'. With over 520 million followers, Buddhism is the world's fourth-largest religion, forming seven percentage of the global population.

Having had enough with the materialistic pursuits of the world, Buddha gave up all luxuries of life including the comfort of family, so as to seek the ultimate path towards happiness. After years of experimentation in meditation and philosophy, Buddha finds the middle path and is enlightened. He conveys what he has found to his followers and speaks to them as to how he's no God but a mere guide towards spirituality. He continued his teachings of *Dhamma* or truth which constituted one of the primary principles of Buddhism, until his death at the age of eighty. Some of the practices of Buddhism include

study of scriptures, observance of moral precepts, renunciation of craving and attachment, the practice of meditation, the cultivation of wisdom, kindness compassion etc. Due to these noble aspects of Buddhism, the religion had acquired a large number of followers not only in Asia but also in the West. With its introduction to various cultures, Buddhism along with many of its symbols got appropriated so as to cater to the interests of different cultures of the world. The aesthetics of Buddhism along with the basic tenants such as peace, compassion etc are appropriated by the market as it fascinates the modern day consumer who is essentially disillusioned by the world of globalization and materialism. Buddhist prayer flags, Buddha idols and the concept of Zen are widely appropriated to such extent that, Buddhism, a religion that preaches desire to be the source of all sorrow, ironically becomes the subject of desire.

The Appropriations of Buddha and Buddhism

The Buddhist idol or the image of Buddha, also called *Buddharupa*, was conceived through the Gandhara form of art and emerged between 1st and 2nd century BCE. It was in fact the 1st instance of appropriation as the idol failed to do justice to the actual form of Buddha who at the time of his death was described as pot-bellied and chubby with a bald head in ancient documents. This however appears to be in contrast with the popular representation of Buddha, where he appears to be fit and lithe with elongated ear lobes and thick curly hair that culminates to form a bump at the top of his head. He usually donned himself in a single red garb made of cotton, however this too was imagined differently as a result of which most of the present day representations of Buddha have him draped in a silk garb. Gandhara form of art was deeply influenced by the aesthetics of Greek art. Greeks had established their supremacy over some parts of northern India during 1st century

as a result of which they perceived it their right to meddle with the art and aesthetics of India. They as always considered their art to be superior and wanted the world to believe the same as a result of which they 'enforced' their art upon a concept of alien culture. They attributed the physical and aesthetic qualities of Greek Gods unto Buddha as a result of which he was sculpted with sharp facial features and a perfectly build physique which was made apparent through a scantily covered silk robe that is characteristic of the Greek sculptures. However this misrepresentation of the idol has been normalized to a level of realistic representation as a result of which it is perceived today by many as the true form of Buddha. In this context, one could not but look closer upon further instances of appropriations and transgressions made over the idol.

The western appropriation of eastern religions isn't anything new. With the emergence of hippie culture in the 1970s, Hinduism was widely appropriated and of late, same has become the plight of Buddhism. In this era of globalization people has turned away from the world of materialistic pressures so as to find solace in the Buddhist ideals of peace, kindness and compassion. Buddha idols, according to the modern seekers of spirituality would emanate positive vibes, peace and tranquillity, a misconception made good use of by the market. Due to this reason Buddha idols have become an inevitable prop of Zen gardens, spas, and other elite spaces which ironically enough has nothing to do with Buddhism or its basic tenets of simplicity and renunciation. The idols used in these spaces are often limited to a bust or head of Buddha which again conveys only the opposite idea of peace for history says how decapitation and destruction of Buddha idols was something that the colonizers carried out so as to sever people's connection with their religion. It also shows how depiction of Buddha in such spaces reduces him to an object

of ridicule, and at times the appropriations appear to be quite blasphemous.

New-age spirituality is often criticized for their hasty approach for they've ripped many religions including Buddhism from its traditional fabric and turned it into a trendy aesthetic décor item. People on choosing the parts they prefer, discard the rest in their efforts to appear spiritual. They hardly make any effort to learn more about the religion before appropriating it as a part of their lives. The appropriations of Buddhism to various cultures have contributed to the emergence of many Buddha-like figures in many parts of South Asia, however consumerism blurred the boundaries and differences between these figures as result of which all are perceived to be the incarnations of Gautama Buddha himself. Even now not all are aware of the fact that *Budai* commonly known as Laughing Buddha was only an eccentric Chinese monk and not Buddha himself. However, market brings them all under the umbrella term of Buddhism and markets them so, thereby which the religion loses its sanctity.

The appealing aesthetics of the Buddha image and Buddhism led the market to explore its avenues as a consumer product. Popular Buddhist monasteries of the world, being centres of tourist attraction came up with the idea of commercializing Buddha by selling knick knacks related to the religion. This included selling Buddha idols as a décor item, key chains, Om bells, wind chimes etc. Hardcore Buddhist countries like Thailand made good use of this avenue and consumerized their traditional knowledge and understanding of Buddhism so as to gain profit and add to the revenue of the country. Many foreigners who visit Thailand are fascinated by Buddhism as a fad, as an exotic culture and fail to comprehend the vast history of the religion. The visitors enjoy going around buying relics of the Buddha image, getting Sak Yant or Yantra tattoo from a monk at Grand Palace and by participating in

Song Kran holidays. The Sak Yant tattoo and Song kran holiday are in fact some of the traditional practices of Thai Buddhism which are appropriated irreverently by the world of consumerism. The tattoo engraved by a monk, using a long metal spike or sharpened bamboo, is believed to hold magical powers and good luck. After receiving the tattoo, the wearer must observe a set of rules according to Buddhist tradition. However, most tourists who get the Yantra tattoo are oblivious to its religious connotations but gets it any way presuming it to be 'cool', consumable and bohemian.

Song Kran a Buddhist holiday celebrating the Thai New Year, now well known for its all-day water fighting escapades and drinking events, is a perfect example as to how traditional Buddhism got distorted into a hybrid form for the consumption of tourists mostly from west. Often seen at tourist hot spots like Bangkok Chiang Mai and Southern Thailand, Song Kran have now evolved to fit within the agendas of a college spring break trip than a religious holiday. These kind of commercial appropriations of Buddhism by Buddhist countries themselves are likely to be problematic as it would affect the worldwide perception of the religion.

Many Buddhist concepts were also commodified by the market so as to sell their products better or to advertise a popular consumerist trend. One such word loaned from Buddhism would be Zen. Of late the word Zen which denotes a school of Mahayana Buddhism has become a codeword for "unwind", "chill" etc. It's plastered on incense, candles and even on lotions. The recently acquired popularity of Zen gardens and its appropriations into urban spaces by interior designers could also be read in close association with this phenomenon. Using the word so as to spread a sense of instant peace and happiness has become so common place, all thanks to the efforts of consumerism. Another instance of consumerism using a Buddhist catchphrase

would be in the case of “Lucky Buddha Enlightened Beer”. The beer is marketed as “something consistently good natured,” and has a laughing Buddha image on the bottle to accentuate the idea. The website uses the word enlightenment and even warps Taoist teachings through faux quotes like “If you think that enlightenment is separate from the drinking of beer, you have not yet understood” in order to sell the product.

Using Buddha idols as home décor is nothing new. Being constantly tried and beaten by the materialistic world, it would come quite naturally for modern man to find solace upon Buddha idols which are believed to emanate peace, happiness and joy. However the appropriations at times would appear a bit over the top especially when they’re distorted to serve aesthetic purposes. Cutting off Buddha’s bump of hair in order to use the head as a vase, placing a Buddha head inside a fish tank so as to create a “Tibetan themed room” are to mention a few. New appropriations does not spare the monks either for one could easily purchase a tea set of mini figurines that feature child like Buddhist monks, through online stores and otherwise. The usage of Prayer flags as a bohemian prop for weddings, or as confetti, or twinkle lights to decorate barbecues would be considered as blasphemy by a few, for they are sacrosanct objects bearing prayers which shouldn’t touch the ground and are to be burned as they age. Buddha printed t-shirts and dresses are yet another form of appropriation that has acquired wide popularity. Like Zen, such attires are supposed to convey peace, happiness and good vibes. It also makes Buddha a hippie symbol especially when used by youngsters who presume the religion to be ‘cool’ for its aesthetics. However not all Buddhist countries are ready to look over such appropriations and it’s a punishable offence in countries like Sri Lanka to use Buddhist symbols as part of one’s attire.

Food sector too, have appropriated Buddhism as a brand which would endorse ‘real and healthy’ food. For instance, Whole Foods used to sell these ‘Lesser Evil chips which was marketed as a way to be “mindful of what you put in your body”. They claimed the product to be organic, healthy and less artificial and the image of a contented Buddhist monk upon the cover completes it. But the representation is rather problematic as Buddhism is more than what we eat, it’s a religion that aims to do away with the sufferings of the world through renunciation, but here Buddhism itself is used as a brand that would allure the masses into the world of consumerist trends. Another example of consumer society opting asceticism to sell stuff would be in the case of Buddha bowls. A Buddha bowl is a balanced and healthy food bowl which would contain adequate amount of vegetables, grains, proteins and a dressing of one’s choice. It’s named after Buddha as he had a round belly and this in itself shows the extent up to which Buddhism is appropriated.

Another surprising appropriation of Buddhism in this field would be the establishment of Buddha themed bars. It’s only last year (2017) that the Buddha bar at Budapest celebrated its 20th anniversary. A typical Buddha bar is likely to have an orientalist ambience and an Asian cuisine with a giant statue of Buddha. Though Zen Buddhism accommodates mindful drinking, not all Buddhists are ready to accept such wild appropriations of Buddhism as a result of which a group of Buddhists protested in Jakarta against a Buddha Bar operating in that city. They were assertive against the use of their religious symbols in a venue serving alcohol and regarded it as an affront to the religion. According to Singhamanas a Buddhist centre in London, it’s not ethical to have a Buddha bar as Buddhism promotes clarity and awareness, something the alcohol industry isn’t exactly behind. These appropriations manifest as

Buddhism to many citizens of the west. Asian cultural practices more than often are stripped with painful frequency of their context and meaning. Despite being alien to the history of a religion, culture or ethnic group one could always be empathetic and respectful towards them by removing oneself from the receiving end of their wild appropriations which are likely transform them into mere icons of popular culture.

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