



The Difference Between Cultural Customs and True Principle

真理與風俗

By Terri Nicholson (Excerpt from a Dharma talk given at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas on October 11, 2018.)

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Last week, a delegation from True Suchness Monastery accompanied by a film crew and journalists came to the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. As one of the early American disciples of the Master, they asked to interview me and I agreed. One of the first things they asked was, being an American, didn't I find it difficult to study Buddhism with the Venerable Master, since he was from China, and the culture and values were so different from Western culture.

I found this a very interesting question for many reasons. It's also a good starting off point for a topic that has interested me for a long time: the difference between cultural customs and true principle.

As I am sure most of you know, the Buddha was Indian. After the Buddha's nirvana, his teaching spread first to China, Japan, Vietnam, and Southeast Asia, and much later to Europe and the rest of the Western world. Wherever the teachings of the Buddha have prospered, they have naturally adapted to the culture and customs of that country.

For example, in India, the Buddha and his disciples went on alms rounds to receive their food and act as a field of blessings for living beings. This worked well in most of Southeast Asia as well, but it was not acceptable in Chinese culture or in the West. So Buddhism adapted, and the Sangha began to grow their own food and accept offerings



上個星期，真如寺的訪問團，在一個攝影團隊和記者們陪同下來到萬佛城。身為上人早期的美國弟子，他們想採訪我，我答應了。他們問的第一個問題就是：身為一位美國人，會不會覺得跟上人學習佛法有些困難？因為上人來自中國，其文化和價值觀與西方文化迥然不同。

我覺得這個問題非常有意思，長久以來，我對這個話題一直很有興趣：

關於文化風俗和真理的不同。

相信大多數人都知道，佛陀是印度人，佛陀入涅槃後，他的教法傳入中國、日本、越南、東南亞；後來又傳入歐洲和西方世界。佛陀的教導不管傳到什麼地方，都會自然地適應當地的文化和風俗。

比如說，在印度，佛陀和他的弟子們會托鉢，接受食物供養，將自己作為眾生的一個福田。這種制度適用於大部分的東南亞國家，但是在中國或者西方文化中，這種行為就不被接受。因此，佛法就因地制宜，僧團開始耕作自己的食物，在寺廟裡接受大眾的供養。

由於印度和東南亞的氣候非常熱，僧眾

at temples and monasteries instead.

Because the climate in India and Southeast Asia is quite warm, Sangha members were able to walk barefoot and wear only a simple garment/precept sash, which left the right shoulder bare. In Northern climates, this was not practical. So inner robes and appropriate footwear were developed. Laypeople's clothing changed as well. Often, in the sutras, the Buddha refers to lay disciples as the "white-robed."

When I visited Sri Lanka, it was still considered respectful to wear white when entering a Buddhist temple. However, in China, white was symbolic of mourning, so Chinese lay Buddhists began wearing black robes instead. Interestingly enough, in the West, black is considered the color of mourning. The principle is that laypeople should wear special clothes to wear to show their respect for a pure Way Place. Which color is chosen is not right or wrong, but merely a matter of cultural custom.

Why do I bring this up? Because I have come to believe that the attachments we have to the culture and customs we have been raised with are very strong. Because of this, it is sometimes difficult for us to recognize what is true principle and what is simply a cultural value or custom. In a community like the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, where people from many different countries and cultures come together to study the Master's teachings, it is important to be aware that many of our differences of opinion are cultural, rather disagreements about the principles of the Buddhadharmā. Some things never change: the Tripitaka, the precepts, and the six principles. We hold these essential things in common. We all want to follow the Buddha's teachings, benefit others, leave suffering, and attain true happiness. The fact that we share these important values with everyone else in this community is truly wonderful.

So how did I reply to the journalists from China? First of all, I said that I didn't believe that the principles the Master taught were in conflict with true Western values. For example, Western religious traditions also value honoring one's parents and elders and being good citizens, though it may look different that it did in China. If I had bowed to my parents, they would have been horrified, but they certainly hoped I would treat them with respect, and care for them when they got old.

Here's another example of a cultural difference that has nothing to do with true principle. I was brought up that it was respectful to look at your elders when they spoke to you. When I came to live in the monastery, however, I was told it was respectful to keep ones

都是赤足走路，露出右肩，簡單的搭一件袈裟。但是這種裝扮就不適用在北方的氣候，於是，袈裟裡邊就加上內袍，也開始穿上可以保護腳的鞋子。在家居士的衣服也有所改變，在經典裡，我們經常看到佛陀用「白衣」來表示在家弟子。

當我參訪斯里蘭卡時，在家居士仍然認為進入廟宇的時候，穿著白色的衣服是表示尊敬。在中國，白色是服喪的象徵，因此中國的在家居士就改穿海青。有趣的是，在西方，黑色象徵服喪。原則上，在家弟子進入一個清淨的道場，應該要穿著適當的衣服以表示尊敬。至於應該穿什麼顏色，視當地文化風俗而定。

為什麼我會提到這些呢？因為我認為我們對於文化風俗的執著是非常強烈的。也因為這樣，有的時候我們很難意識到，什麼是真理，什麼只不過是一種文化或是風俗。在一個像萬佛城這樣的道場裡，很多來自不同國家和文化的人，一起學習上人的教導。所以我們要意識到，很多不同的意見其實只不過是一些文化上的差異，並不是在佛法的認知上有所不同。有些事情是永遠不變的，比如說「三藏」、「戒律」還有「六大宗旨」，這些是我們共同的理念。我們都想追隨佛陀的教導，要利益他人，離苦得樂。我們能夠在萬佛城，共同持有這些非常重要的價值觀，我覺得是非常美妙的。

那麼我是如何回覆這些中國來的記者呢？我首先就說，我並不相信上人的教導跟西方文化價值有衝突。比如說，在西方的宗教傳統裡，也重視恭敬自己的父母和長者，並且也要做一個好公民；儘管這和中國文化表達的方式看起來可能不一樣。如果我向父母磕頭，他們可能會被嚇著；但是父母當然希望我能夠恭敬他們，在他們年老的時候能夠照顧他們。

這裡還有一個例子非關真理，僅僅是文化上的差異。在我成長的過程中被教導，跟長者說話的時候，要看著他們表示恭

eyes downcast when a Sangha member or other elder is speaking to you. The principle, that of respect, is the same in both cultures, but its outward manifestation is completely opposite.

I would like to share a story from when I first came to study at Gold Mountain Monastery that illustrates one of these differences in cultural customs and how they sometimes cause misunderstandings.

Back in 1973, I was taking a beginning Chinese class at San Francisco State and would often go to the monastery afterwards to do my homework before evening ceremony and lecture. One day while I was doing this, one of the bhikshus asked me to serve tea to the Master and some guests. Feeling honored to be entrusted with this task, I took the tray and began my ascent to the third floor, where the Master saw visitors. "Serve Shifu first," he called after me.

When I entered the guest room, I found the Master seated at a table with two Chinese Bhikshunis. He motioned me forward with the tea. My Chinese was still rudimentary and my understanding of Chinese etiquette, let alone Buddhist monastery etiquette, was non-existent. Unfortunately, so was my awareness of this fact. I dutifully poured tea for the Master and then offered tea to the two nuns. Both of them covered their cups with their hands, shook their heads, and said, "No, thank you," in Chinese. So, I didn't give them any.

The Master immediately jumped in, as if averting disaster. "Ta bu dung. She doesn't understand," he said.

But, I did. They said they didn't want any. I could understand that much. "Wo dung," I insisted.

The Master then picked up the teapot, poured tea in each of the nun's cups, and dismissed me. I was mystified, but nothing else was ever said about it. However, I was not asked to serve tea to the Master and his guests again.

Many years later, I learned that the Chinese almost always refuse food or drink when it is offered to them. According to Chinese etiquette, the host continues to insist until the person acquiesces. I have noticed that a guest usually still refuses to drink the tea until it is almost time to leave and the tea is no longer hot. I'm not even sure now that I've gotten that right. I am sure there are many, many other times I wasn't even aware that I offended people with my lack of understanding of the customs of other cultures.

So, was I being disrespectful? I did not mean to be. As Shifu had told the Bhikshunis, I simply did not understand the custom. Of course I made it worse by stubbornly insisting that I did understand, but I had thought Shifu meant I didn't understand their Chinese. Because of the kindness and compassion of the Master there wasn't a problem, but you can see that it might have caused offense if someone less wise had been

敬。當我住在廟上的時候，別人卻告訴我，當法師或者長者跟我們說話的時候，要把眼睛垂下來才表示恭敬。在兩個不同的文化裡一樣都有恭敬長輩的觀念，但是它的表相卻完全相反。

我想分享第一次到金山寺學習的故事，這個故事正好可以舉出文化差異有時可能會造成誤解。

1973年的時候，我在舊金山州立大學上初級中文。當時，我常到廟上，在晚課和聽經之前做我的學校作業。有一天，正當我在做功課的時候，一位比丘要我給上人和他的客人奉茶。我覺得非常的榮幸被賦予這個任務，趕緊拿著茶盤上三樓，就是上人見客人的地方。「先給師父奉茶！」比丘在我身後喊著。

當我進到會客室，我看見上人跟兩位中國比丘尼坐在一張桌子旁邊；上人招呼我去奉茶。當時，我對中文只是略懂皮毛，更遑論中國禮儀還是佛教禮節。更糟的是，我自己毫不知情。我盡責的給上人倒茶，接著準備給兩位比丘尼倒茶，她們用手蓋住自己的杯子，搖著頭用中文說：「不用了，謝謝！」所以，我就沒給她們倒茶。

上人彷彿要避免一場災難，趕緊說：「她不懂！」但是，我確實聽懂她們說的話，我知道她們不要茶。所以我非常固執地說：「我懂！」。

上人拿起茶壺，親自給兩位比丘尼倒茶，示意要我離開。我當時一頭霧水，也沒有得到任何解釋。從此，我再也沒有給上人和他的客人奉茶。

很多年後，我才了解到，中國人在接受招待的時候，幾乎總是會拒絕食物或飲料。在中國文化裡，宴

handling the situation.

The summer before last, I found myself in another embarrassing situation when my husband and I were in Taiwan, again because I didn't understand the customs. We were visiting Sheng Kuang, a sculpture factory where our Earth Treasury Bodhisattva image was being made. Before we went to see the image and discuss business matters, we were served tea and fresh fruit. That is where I made my mistake. In American culture, we very often comment enthusiastically about the food we are served, as a way of showing our appreciation. What I hadn't understood was the amazing generosity of the people and the culture. So, since I love mangos, I smiled and told the owners how delighted I was, because mangos are one of my favorite fruits. When it came time to leave, much to my embarrassment, I was presented with an entire case of mangos to take back with me, not only that day, but the next time we visited as well. I felt like a greedy ghost. Luckily, I could offer the fruit to the temple in Taipei. It did explain why no one had ever told us whether they liked the gifts we had brought for them. It was not part of their custom.

There are countless examples of these differences. In some cultures it is good manners to bring your bowl up to your mouth, in others you must never lift it off the table. We greet each other differently, too. In Asia, you put your palms together; in America, you shake hands; in France, you kiss someone on both cheeks; while in Sri Lanka, you touch your cheek to both of theirs. In some cultures, it is perfectly fine to ask someone how much money they make, in other cultures it is considered extremely rude. Americans are very concerned with confidentiality with regards to health concerns, while some other cultures feel the state of your health is everybody's business. There are pros and cons to all of these customs, but it does not make them right or wrong. They are simply different.

Sometimes we are fortunate enough to have someone compassionately explain the customs of their culture to us, but often they are so deeply ingrained we do not even recognize them as such. Instead we feel it is the "right" way to do things. I remember Shifu once told me that in the heavens everyone agrees. But here in the human realm, if you get a group of people together, it is almost inevitable they will have differing opinions about things. I hope all of us can remember to respect our differences of opinion and remember that sometimes, it is simply a matter of differences in customs. For the most part, we agree on the most important things and that is why we are here. ☸

請的時候，主人要不斷的禮請直到客人接受為止。我也注意到，有時候客人一直拒絕喝茶，等到要離開的時候，茶都涼了才喝。我到現在還不確定，我是不是明白了。我知道，我常因為沒有意識到不同的文化風俗，而冒犯別人。

那我當時真的失敬嗎？我不是有意的。正如上人對比丘尼講的，我只是不懂風俗罷了。當然，那時我非常堅持地說我懂，就把情況弄僵。我當時以為，師父肯定認為我不懂他們的中文。因為上人很慈悲，所以沒什麼問題。但是你就知道，如果不是像上人這麼有智慧的人，當時的情況可能會冒犯到客人。

有關文化差異的例子實在是太多了。在某些文化中，將碗放在嘴邊是有教養，但在某些文化中，碗盤絕對不能離開桌面。人們相互問候的方式也大不同。在亞洲，人們合掌；在美國，人們握手；在法國，人們親吻兩頰；在斯里蘭卡，人們相互觸碰對方的臉頰。在某些文化中，詢問他人薪水是完全可以的；在某些文化中，這被認為是非常無理的。美國人對於健康方面的問題都避而不談，某些文化卻認為個人的健康狀況是所有人的事。這些風俗都各有利弊，並沒有對錯；僅僅是風俗不同。

有時，我們很幸運能夠有人好心地向我們解釋他們的風俗民情，但有時這些風俗因為根深蒂固反而讓人忽略。相反地，我們還覺得這是「正確」的做事方式。

我記得上人曾經告訴我，天上的人都是彼此非常和合。但是在人間，如果你將一群人聚集在一起，肯定就會有彼此意見分歧的時候。我希望我們能夠記得尊重彼此不同的意見。有時，這些意見只不過風俗上的差異。大致來說，我們對重要的事情沒有異議，這就是為什麼我們會在這裡。☸