Journal of Communication and Religion Vol. 43
No. 2 Summer 2020, pp. 5-21

Asian-American Buddhist Identity Talk: Natural Criticism of Buddhism in the U.S.

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Abstract: In this study, I explicate Asian-American Buddhist identity discourse and how talk surrounding this religious identity revealed a natural criticism of the current state of Buddhism in the U.S. Using cultural discourse analysis, I unveil how, as participants discussed what it means to be an American Buddhist, they also revealed deeper beliefs about social relationships and how they see themselves placed within the U.S. American religious landscape. Critiques toward Buddhism in the U.S. includes cultural appropriation and commercialization of the religion, as well as the use of the term "Buddhist" to further perpetuate the stereotype of Asian Americans as outsiders and foreigners.

Introduction

This study emerged from a heart-to-heart conversation I had with a friend who identifies as an Asian-American (AA) Buddhist. This friend shared how she often felt like she had to bridge between older Asian immigrant practitioners who held certain conceptions about Buddhism and younger non-AAs who had recently discovered the religion. On the one hand, older immigrant practitioners she encounters in her Buddhist practice often disapprove of what they perceive as Americanized adaptations to the religion that connects them to their cultural heritage. Younger seekers in her Buddhist circle, on the other hand, have expressed their discomfort with ritualistic practices, such as bowing and ancestral worship, which they associate with Buddhism. My friend shared how she often wondered how she fits into the ongoing discussion of the shape and form of Buddhism in the U.S. This contemplation of hers, her effort to place herself among American Buddhists, is what prompted me to study and eventually write an analysis on AA Buddhist identity discourse.

As someone who identifies both as an AA Buddhist and an adult immigrant, I have always been interested in differences and similarities between Buddhism as practiced in the U.S. and Buddhism as practiced in my home country of Indonesia. Having been raised as a Buddhist by my mother (although she never labeled it as such), I found that rediscovering Buddhism as an adult in the U.S. felt like coming home. That being said, I noticed socio-cultural differences between how Buddhism is presented and practiced in U.S. spiritual spaces and the practice with which I was raised. The conversation I had with my friend reminded me of said differences, which, in turn, started off my research pursuit of Buddhism in the U.S.

At a growth rate of 170% since the year 2000 (Willis, 2012), Buddhism continues to be one of the fastest-growing religions in the United States. Since Americans' first exposure to it during the 1893 World Parliament of Religion, Buddhism has gone from being a fringe religion adopted by countercultural figures like the Beat poets in the 1950s

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(Seager, 2012) to one that has a formidable presence in the American spiritual landscape (Coleman, 2002; Fields, 1992; Layman, 1976 ; 2012; Smith, 2006; Willis, 2012). Similar to other world religions, Buddhism has different types of lineages, as well as a variety of followers.

For the most part, scholarly inquiries pertaining to Buddhism have followed two divergent tracks. One focused on the religion as practiced by Asian immigrants and their descendants, whereas the other focused on non-Asian, mostly Euro-American practitioners and their take on Buddhism. According to these studies (Cadge, 2004; Numrich, 1999, 2000, 2003; Prebish, 1998; Tamney, 1992; Tanaka, 1998), the main difference between the two lies in how the religion is used to fulfill certain needs in one group over the other. For most (not all) Asians and AAs, Buddhist practice is a way for them to preserve and/or get in touch with their ethnic and cultural identity. For many non-AA converts, especially those who were introduced to the religion as adults, Buddhism is often used to fulfill spiritual needs they could not fulfill through religions of their cultural heritage (Fields, 1998; Nattier, 1998; Seagar, 2012).

This observation led scholars to divide American Buddhists into two main categories: (a) immigrant (Seager, 2012), ethnic (Fields, 1998), or "baggage" (Nattier, 1998) Buddhists and (b) convert (Seager, 2012) or elite Buddhists (Nattier, 1998). Not surprisingly, most AAs are placed in the immigrant/ethnic/baggage category. Inherent in the mutually exclusive, reductive categories is the assumption that most Asians and their descendants practice a more traditional version of Buddhism, which include rituals of supplication (e.g., burning incense, praying to a supreme deity to ask for favors), whereas most convert/elite/non-Asian Buddhists are theorized to focus on "the practice of meditation . . . which is traditionally reserved for monastics in Asia" (Fields, 1998, p. 147).

Despite comprising more than two-thirds of Americans who identify as Buddhists (Han, 2017), AA Buddhists are underrepresented—and often misrepresented—in scholarly sources. At best, the intersectionality (Nash, 2008) of race, gender, ethnicity, and generational differences inherent in this diverse category of peoples has not been explicated enough. At worst, it has been overlooked, and as a result, AA Buddhists have been studied as one monolithic whole. Although it is true that participants in this study were born into a Buddhist socio-cultural environment, they do not adhere to "traditional" practices of Buddhism usually associated with people of Asian descent. Similar to what has been prescribed to their non-Asian Buddhist counterparts, they are dedicated practitioners of meditation. Yet they also cherish and value the "Asian-ness" inherent in Buddhism as a religion borne out of that region of the world.

Through this analysis, I aim to unveil how some contemporary AA Buddhists see themselves positioned within the American Buddhist landscape. The overall critical tone of the analysis is the result of participants' dissatisfaction with the state of Buddhism in the U.S. According to them, before they can comfortably place themselves in the Buddhist landscape here in the U.S., the landscape itself has to change.

The usage of the term "Buddhism in the U.S." in this analysis, as opposed to the more commonly used term "American Buddhism" (Cheah, 2011; Seager, 2012: Storhoff & Whalen-Bridge, 2010; Williams & Queen, 1999), reflects participants' critique of the perception that Buddhism, as it is known in this country, is still predominately perceived as a form of White American spirituality. Participants in this study agreed that the adjective "American" in "American Buddhism" still connotes White/Euro-

Americans (Cheah, 2011). What is often implied in the term "American Buddhism" is that Buddhism becomes truly "American" only when Euro-Americans are part of its development (Tanaka, 1998). Participants collectively chose the term "Buddhism in the U.S." because for them, it is more inclusive and reflects the diversity of Buddhist lineages in the country. In an attempt to represent their voices accurately in this analysis, unless the term "American Buddhism" is used by participants themselves, I use "Buddhism in the U.S." when discussing the religion as it currently exists in the country.

Speech Community

Members of the speech community (Milburn, 2004) forming the focal point of this analysis identify as Buddhist practitioners of AA descent. They consisted of 11 Vietnamese Americans, 6 Chinese Americans, 2 Filipino Americans, and 1 Indonesian American, totaling 20 participants. They all follow the Plum Village (PV) tradition (*Plum Village*, n.d.) established by world-renowned Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. Since they are all followers of the PV tradition, this analysis excludes the experiences of AA followers of the plethora of Buddhist lineages and traditions currently existing in the U.S., namely Jodo Shinshu and Sokkai Gakai (both of which are Japanese forms of Buddhism), Tibetan, and Theravada (Seager, 2012), just to name a few.

Although PV is grounded in Vietnamese culture, it is known to be a cosmopolitan Buddhist movement with a broad, international scope (Seager, 2012). Followers of PV in the U.S. consist of all races and ethnicities. Monastics ordained in the tradition also come from all over the world. In the PV practice center on the West Coast of the U.S. that is frequented by participants of this study, Buddhist teachings (i.e., *Dharma* talks) are simultaneously translated into either English or Vietnamese, depending on in which language the teaching is given.

During the course of this study, I learned about differences in perspectives and experiences of being a part of the PV tradition depending on participants' ethnic background. For example, those who claim a Vietnamese American identity report feeling a stronger affinity toward the tradition. Some of them bemoaned the loss of an exclusively Vietnamese space to practice Buddhism, whereas others applauded Thich Nhat Hanh's concerted effort to make the practice available to everyone. For this analysis, I chose to focus on the common thread shared by all participants: their critique of the state of Buddhism in the U.S., which they feel excludes AAs in general, regardless of their ethnic background.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Data for this study were collected from one-on-one semi-structured interviews with 20 individuals between the ages of 25 and 65 years who identify as AA Buddhists. All participants were college-educated. A total of 15 of the 20 interviews were conducted via FaceTime or Skype, and 5 were conducted in person. Interviews occurred during the period of May to December 2017. I recruited participants through snowball sampling, beginning with fellow practitioners I personally know, who then recommended others interested in participating in the study. In order to protect their privacy, I asked each participant to choose a pseudonym to be used in the analysis. If they did not choose one, I assigned one for them. All participants signed an informed consent form prior to interviews. For FaceTime/Skype interviews, participants sent in their consent form via email with an e-signature prior to the interview. Interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes

and were audio recorded using a digital audio-recording device. I transcribed the audio recordings word for word.

The main theoretical framework I utilized for my analysis was cultural discourse analysis (CuDA) (Carbaugh, 2007; Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2017). CuDA is a theory, method, and philosophy to investigate communicative practices ethnographically. It follows the intellectual tradition of ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1972 Philipsen & Carbaugh, 1986) and stands at the juncture of the theories of cultural communication (Philipsen, 1987, 2002) and communication codes (Philipsen, 1997; Philipsen, Coutu, & Covarrubias, 2005). It explicates that underneath seemingly routine and mundane daily social interactions lies a potent and deep cultural commentary of who we are (identity), how we relate to one another (relations), what our actions and emotions mean to us (acting and feeling), and how we are placed in certain settings (dwelling) (Carbaugh, 2007; Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2017).

The study of religious communication and how it reflects certain forms of identity has a long-standing tradition in the ethnography of communication, of which CuDA follows. However, these studies have mostly examined identity enactments in non-Asian religious communities in the U.S. (Bauman, 1983; Greenhouse, 1986; Molina-Markham, 2012, 2013, 2014; Sequeira, 1994; Shoaps, 2002).

As a theoretical framework, CuDA addresses questions relating to functional accomplishment, structure, and sequences pertaining to a specific communication practice. In order to properly address these questions, Carbaugh (2007) suggests applying five modes of inquiry: theoretical, descriptive, interpretive, comparative, and critical. Whereas the first three modes are considered to be mandatory, the comparative and critical modes are not necessary to complete a CuDA analysis. That being said, should a critical voice naturally emerge from a community that forms the locus of one's study, the ethnographer is ethically obliged to bring forth said voice in his or her analysis (Carbaugh, 1989).

A voice of natural criticism (Carbaugh, 1989) emerged when I interviewed participants with regard to claiming a Buddhist identity in non-Buddhist public settings. What I had initially assumed was going to be a conversation on identity as it relates to a particular religion quickly turned into a critique of the state of Buddhism in the U.S. As will be further explicated in this analysis, claiming a Buddhist identity as an AA within the context of U.S. mainstream identity politics is often wrought with issues of cultural appropriation and the orientalist practice of "othering" (Said, 1978).

Following the CuDA (Carbaugh, 2007; Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2017) analytical sequence, I began my analysis with descriptive analysis. I extracted main themes emerging from participants' discussion on claiming a Buddhist identity in their daily social lives, followed by a natural criticism (Carbaugh, 1989) of Buddhism in the U.S. I then moved on to interpretive analysis. I started by identifying "Buddhist" as a *discursive hub* (Carbaugh, 2007) through which meanings of relations, acting, feeling, and dwelling radiate. Through this analytical step, I demonstrate how as participants discussed being Buddhist, they also revealed deeper beliefs about social relationships and how they see themselves placed within the U.S. American religious landscape.

From there, I made the analytical move of formulating *cultural propositions* (Carbaugh, 2007; Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2017), which are statements created using participants' own words as they make sense of their own observations and behaviors. Based on these propositions, I then formulated *cultural premises* (Carbaugh, 2007;

Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2017), which contain highlights of participants' beliefs about (a) what exists and/or (b) what is proper or valued in their discussion of both their identity as AA Buddhists and the state of Buddhism in the U.S. I argue that these premises form the ethical juncture (Carbaugh, 1989) through which their criticism toward Buddhism in the U.S. is based.

Findings: Descriptive Analysis

The following is a summary of main themes emerging from participants' discussion on using the religious identity term "Buddhist" in their daily social interactions.

On Claiming a Buddhist Identity

The first question I asked participants during our interview was whether they use the term "Buddhist" to identify themselves as they go about their daily lives in non-Buddhist spaces. Out of the 20 participants in the study, only 2 confirmed their comfort in integrating the term "Buddhist" with their social identity. The rest of the participants gave three main reasons to explain their hesitance in adopting this particular identity: (a) discomfort in having to live up to others' expectations of being Buddhist; (b) the term "Buddhist" is often used as an added label of foreignness for AAs; and (c) participants' belief that the U.S. mainstream understanding of Buddhism is inaccurate.

The first reason for their reluctance to adopt the identity label of "Buddhist" is that they feel like they have to live up to others' expectations of how a Buddhist should conduct himself or herself:

> At first, I was hesitant to adopt the term "Buddhist" because to me it sounds too perfect. I'm worried I might taint it. Like if you're Buddhist, you have to be like the monastics. . . . You can never be angry. Always peaceful, never angry. I felt responsible for embodying what people assume Buddhists to be like. I don't want to destroy that image. (Frieda)

Frieda expressed a sentiment shared by many participants in that they felt too inadequate to claim a full-fledged Buddhist identity. As June echoed, given the current level of practice in which she considers herself to be engaged, she is more comfortable referring to herself as a "cultural Buddhist," as opposed to a "real Buddhist":

> I'm not comfortable with the label "Buddhist." I apply the Buddha's teachings on a daily basis in my capacity as a social worker, but I'm not the "real deal." The monastics, who give their lives to the practice . . . they're the ones who practice the true and pure way of Buddhism. I'd feel more comfortable calling myself a "cultural Buddhist" than a "real Buddhist." It's similar to being a Jew: You inherit it from your parents, you practice it somewhat, yet you can still claim to be a follower of Judaism. (June)

It is interesting to note that although June claimed to be a "cultural Buddhist," who, like a "cultural Jew," inherited the religion from her parents and practices it only "somewhat," she also shared how she regularly applies Buddhist teachings in her professional role as a social worker.

Whereas the term "Buddhist" is not an identity label embraced by participants, the term "mindfulness practitioner" is one they could rally behind. Instead of being a Buddhist, participants shared how they are making every effort to practice the Buddha's teachings in their daily lives, with the practice itself being emphasized over any particular religious identity. Kuo Chen said she referred to herself "as a 'mindfulness practitioner,' the emphasis being on 'mindfulness.'" Vanessa said, "I don't identify myself as a Buddhist. I am a deep practitioner, and I live a life of mindfulness." Howard noted, "I'm not Buddhist. I practice mindfulness. I'm a mindfulness practitioner."

The second reason given by participants for their reluctance in claiming a Buddhist identity is how the term "Buddhist" is often used as a label of foreignness and/or otherness targeted toward AAs:

> Chinese Americans I know don't really use the label "Buddhist" even if they practice it. My theory is it's because it's a minority religion, and we don't want to deal with another minority label. . . . It's another label of otherness that could be used against us. (June)

David echoed June's sentiment. He shared how he did not embrace being Buddhist when he was growing up in North Carolina for fear of further highlighting his "difference": "Growing up, I didn't embrace Buddhism because of blatant and indirect racism I experienced in North Carolina where I grew up. I didn't want to be any more different than I already am."

Indirect racism is how Harry characterized questions he has been asked by non-Buddhists about his Buddhist identity, which is linked to the legitimacy of his claim of being an American:

> People who practice [Buddhism] never ask whether I'm Buddhist. It's people who are trying to place me, who are unfamiliar with me, they ask me a bunch of stuff because they're trying to figure me out. . . . They're trying to place me, y'know? "Where are you from? Tell me about yourself. . . . Oh! You're Vietnamese? Are you Buddhist?" They're indirectly questioning my claim of being American, of being from here, instead of somewhere in Asia.

The third and final reason given by participants as to why they are reluctant to embrace the identity term "Buddhist" in their daily social lives is their belief that the U.S. American mainstream understanding of Buddhism is inaccurate. According to David, "The main reason why I don't identify that much with it [being Buddhist] is because Western understanding of Buddhism is associated with mainstream religion, and I don't think Buddhism is a religion the way people understand it is." David further clarified in our interview that his understanding of "mainstream religion" is that it consists of a lot of mindless rituals, the opposite of what he believes Buddhism propagates. In addition to this perceived lack of understanding, participants are also critical of how a commercialized and empty form of Buddhism (that is, empty of its central philosophies and teachings) has been co-opted into mainstream U.S. culture:

> I do use the term "Buddhist" in daily life. But sometimes I feel like it's just a trendy thing. It's like I'm just following everyone

> else who's jumping on the Buddhist bandwagon. It's become too popular. Like pork belly. I know! I'm equating Buddhism to pork belly [laughing]. It's kind of the same as to what happened to yoga. Yoga has been co-opted into American [mainstream] culture. People forget that it came from a spiritual practice. (Carol)

Carol was raised in a culturally Buddhist family. When she was young, she did not practice Buddhism with her family. Like most participants, she found her way back to Buddhist teachings in college, when she took a class on Buddhist philosophy. She is an active practitioner, yet she hesitates to claim a Buddhist identity because she does not want to be perceived as a mere trend follower, like someone who recently started liking pork belly. Her comments underline participants' critique of the commercialization of Buddhism in the U.S., which is not unlike what has been done to the yoga tradition (Antony, 2014; Puustinen & Rautaniemi, 2015; York, 2001) and has resulted in a disconnection between its current form and its spiritual origins.

Natural Criticism of Buddhism in the U.S.

The second half of this descriptive analysis contains a summary of participants' natural criticism of the current state of Buddhism in the U.S.

Commercialization of Buddhism in the U.S.

Conversations regarding the complexities of claiming a Buddhist identity as an AA made for an organic segue into a critique of the state of Buddhism in the U.S. The first critique pertains to commercialization of Buddhism in the U.S., a theme that participants in this study were highly passionate about, as illustrated in the following comment:

> I find the American notion of Buddhism to be problematic. It's a bastardized understanding without context or history within which the practice is placed. It's all about those Groupon mindfulness twerking yoga classes. This is the ultimate manifestation of capitalism, where people profit from a practice that's supposed to be so meaningful. (Mai)

According to Mai, the ultimate manifestation of capitalism in the U.S. is signified by the success of U.S. mainstream culture in turning Buddhism from a meaningful spiritual practice into something that is merely profitable, not unlike a yoga class one would find on the Groupon app. June echoed this sentiment when she observed how the practice of mindfulness meditation, a central practice in Buddhist teachings, has entered mainstream U.S. culture without any mentioning of its Asian origins:

> Mindfulness meditation is so popular now. It's entered U.S. mainstream culture like mindfulness practice in schools. Google has their employees practice mindfulness in an effort to increase their productivity, etc. *Yet, it's a form [of Buddhism] that's stripped from its Asian origins* [emphasis added].

For participants, the commercialization of Buddhism in mainstream U.S. culture not only means the emptying of the religion's spiritual and philosophical significance but also that it has been culturally appropriated. The resulting version of Buddhism has been

whitewashed without acknowledgment of its Asian origins and contexts. It is a vacuous husk of what participants believe it to be, hence their reluctance to proclaim a Buddhist identity in their daily social interactions. This act of cultural appropriation (Rogers, 2006) forms the second critique participants have toward the state of Buddhism in the U.S.: the lack of acknowledgment of AA contributions to the development of Buddhism in the U.S.

Lack of Acknowledgment of Asian-American Contributions

When it comes to a general, mainstream understanding of Buddhism in the U.S., participants agree that AAs and their immigrant elders are not given proper acknowledgment of their role in bringing the religion to the U.S. They are also not featured in mainstream conversations about the future development of Buddhism as it establishes itself as an important element of the U.S. spiritual landscape. According to participants, Asians and AAs are either dismissed as practicing a ritualistic, superstitious form of Buddhism, or they are not mentioned in mainstream conversations about Buddhism at all. As Sue shared,

> [T]he troubling thing about Buddhism in the U.S. is that it's dominated by Western, White elite Buddhists. Aside from immigrant families who are portrayed to perform it in a ritualistic way, the mainstream part of Buddhism is dominated by White Buddhists.

According to Sue, Buddhism in the U.S. is associated with the White elite population. Asians, on the other hand, are associated with a form of Buddhism that is merely ritualistic. Frankie, another participant, is also critical of the erasure of Asians/AAs in the development of Buddhism in the U.S. He emphasized how all forms of Buddhism practiced in the U.S. have Asian roots. There is no such thing as a "Western" version of Buddhism; if it were not for the Asian immigrants who brought the religion to the U.S. in the first place, there would not be any American Buddhists at all:

> When people think of Buddhism here, there's seldom acknowledgment of its Asian roots. Every generation in the U.S. practicing Buddhism owes it to Asians who brought the religion to the U.S. in the first place. *There isn't really a Western Buddhism* [emphasis added]. (Frankie)

This emphasis on the role of Asians and AAs in the establishment of Buddhism in the U.S. runs contrary to mainstream depictions of Buddhism as a religion that was brought over by White Buddhist teachers who journeyed to South Asia in the 1960s and 1970s to learn from Asian monks and lay teachers and who then returned to the U.S. and started practice centers based on what they acquired during their visit (Leamaster, 2012; Seager, 2012; Sun, 2014; Williams & Queen, 1999). The start of Buddhism in the U.S. is often credited to these non-AA teachers, without the acknowledgment of the important role Asian immigrants played in bringing the practice from their home countries and establishing it here as part of their contribution to the overall U.S. religious and cultural landscape (Hsu, 2017).

Participants in this study are critical of the invisibility of Asians and AAs in the mainstream U.S. American understanding of the origins of Buddhism in the U.S.

According to Sue, "the public needs to know it's [Buddhism] has been here all along. White people didn't bring it back from India or Burma." As participant Thuy-Anh Duong poignantly commented,

> Americans don't see us. They don't see Asian people. We feel like when people think of American Buddhism, these White teachers come to mind, the ones who "discovered" Buddhism in the '70s and brought it back to the U.S., rather than the millions of Asians who brought the practice to the U.S., who have always been here.

Thuy-Anh's comment goes straight to the heart of participants' critique regarding cultural appropriation of Buddhism in the U.S. According to participants, there is a perception among U.S. Americans that White Buddhist teachers "discovered" (Singh, 2003) Buddhism in the 1970s during their journey to Asia and brought this "new" religion back to the mainland. There is no mention of the millions of Asian immigrants who brought the practice into the country and have been maintaining it for quite some time. What participants see as a potential solution to this misrepresentation is an understanding and acknowledgment of Buddhism that is not separate from its Asian origins. As Frankie points out, Buddhism cannot be split apart from its Asian origins and historical context. If one wants to be Buddhist in the U.S., one needs to know Asia. According to Frankie, "If you want to be Buddhist, you have to know Asia, you have to know this thing called Asia. You have to learn the narrative history of Buddhism, which is rooted in Asian cultures and histories."

Interpretive Analysis

For the interpretive segment of this analysis, I treated the religious identity term "Buddhist" as a *discursive hub of being* (Carbaugh, 2007) from which *radiants of meaning* (Carbaugh, 2007), such as relations, feelings, acting, and dwelling, could emerge. My analysis of participants' discussion of their reluctance to adopt a Buddhist identity in a U.S. American mainstream setting revealed a deep cultural commentary on meanings of relations and dwelling (Carbaugh, 2007), which I explicate later in this analysis.

Following the CuDA analytical framework (Carbaugh, 2007; Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2017), I extracted *cultural propositions* (formed using participants' own words) and *cultural premises* (analytic statements about what exists and what is valued) to unveil deeply seated beliefs participants have regarding their identity as AA Buddhists, as well as their critique of the state of Buddhism in the U.S. As follows are two sets of lists of cultural propositions (key terms in the participants' own words). The first list consists of propositions found within AA discourse on Buddhist identity, whereas the second list contains propositions within participants' criticism of the current state of Buddhism in the U.S.

Cultural Propositions within Asian-American Discourse on Buddhist Identity

- If you "claim" a "Buddhist" identity, you are "responsible" for "embodying" what "people" "assume" "Buddhists" to be like, which is to be always "calm" and never "angry."
- There's a difference between "cultural" "Buddhists" and "real" "Buddhists."

- A "mindfulness" "practitioner" is someone who "practices" "mindfulness."
- "Buddhism" is not an "identity," it's a "practice."
- "Buddhist" identity can be used as yet "another" "label" of "otherness."
- "Buddhist" identity can be used to "indirectly" "question" an "Asian American's" claim of being "American."
- Claiming a "Buddhist" identity can make one be misperceived as a "trend" "follower."
- "Western" understanding of "Buddhism" is associated with "organized religion."
- "Buddhism" is not a "religion" the way "people" "understand" it is.
- Like "yoga," "Buddhism" has been "co-opted" into "American" culture.
- "People" forget that "Buddhism" and "yoga" come from a "spiritual" "practice."

Cultural Propositions within Asian-American Buddhists' Criticism of Buddhism in the U.S.

- The "American" notion of "Buddhism" is "problematic."
- The "troubling" thing about "Buddhism" in the "U.S." is that it is dominated by "Western," "White" "elite" "Buddhists."
- When people think of "Buddhism," "White" "teachers" who "discovered" "Buddhism" in the 1970s "come" to "mind," rather than the "millions" of "Asians" who "brought" the "practice" to the "U.S."
- "Asian" "immigrant" "families" are "portrayed" to "perform" "Buddhism" in a "ritualistic" way.
- The American notion of Buddhism is a "bastardized" "understanding" without "context" or "history" within which the "practice" is "placed."
- "Buddhism" in "the U.S." is the "ultimate" "manifestation" of "capitalism," where "people" "profit" from a "practice" that is so "meaningful."
- "Buddhism" in "the U.S." is a "form" that is "stripped" from its "Asian" origins.
- The American "public" needs to "know" that "Buddhism" has been "here" "all along."
- There is not really a "Western" version of "Buddhism."
- If one wants to be "Buddhist," one has to "know" this "thing" called "Asia."
- Every "generation" in the "U.S." practicing "Buddhism" "owes" it to "Asians" who "brought" the "religion" to the "U.S." in the "first place."

As follows are the cultural premises based on "Buddhist" as a discursive hub of being:

What Exists

- The perception of Buddhists as calm and never angry
- Differences between "cultural" Buddhists and "real" Buddhists

- A Western understanding of Buddhism that is associated with organized religion
- A trend of claiming a Buddhist identity in mainstream U.S. culture
- An American version of Buddhism that is separated from its Asian spiritual origins
- Dominance of White elite Buddhists in American Buddhism
- A commercialized, co-opted form of Buddhism
- The practice of profiting from Buddhism
- "Buddhist" as a form of practice, instead of an identity label
- The use of the terms "Buddhists" and "Buddhism" to question AAs' claim of being American and to further differentiate AAs from mainstream U.S. Americans
- The perception that Buddhism was brought to the U.S. by White Buddhist teachers in the 1970s
- The erasure of contributions made by AAs in establishing and developing the religion in the U.S.
- A debt every American Buddhist has toward Asians who brought the religion to the U.S. in the first place.
- A deep connection between Buddhism and Asian culture, narrative, and history
- The perception that AA Buddhists only perform Buddhism in a ritualistic manner

What Is Valued

- An understanding of Buddhism in the U.S. that is grounded in Asia/Asian culture at large
- Acknowledgment of AA contributions to the development of Buddhism in the U.S.
- A non-commercialized form of Buddhism that reflects its philosophy and spirituality
- Buddhist identity that reflects its practice, teaching, and philosophy instead of a mere trend
- Acceptance of AAs as real Americans, instead of perpetual foreigners

Discussion

All participants in this study practice Buddhism at differing levels following the PV tradition. Yet, when asked whether they are comfortable identifying themselves as "Buddhist," only 2 of the 20 participants felt comfortable claiming said identity in their daily lives. Further analysis revealed reasons why the majority of participants are reluctant to refer to themselves as "Buddhist." According to participants, claiming a Buddhist identity is a less-than-ideal move for AAs. This is mainly due to the fact that the term itself is wrought with misperceptions. Within U.S. American mainstream society, in which they dwell, the term has been culturally appropriated to the point where it has been emptied of its central philosophies and teachings. Being Buddhist is "trendy" because, like yoga, it has been co-opted and turned into a commercialized and lucrative

practice-for-sale. To make matters worse, "Buddhist" as a type of personhood (Carbaugh, 1988) has also been used to further highlight misperceptions of AAs as perpetual foreigners, positioned in unequal relations with non-AAs, who do not have their claim of American-ness contested on a regular basis. The implication is that these two seemingly disparate themes, reluctance in claiming a Buddhist identity and critique of the current state of Buddhism in the U.S., are connected: if it weren't for what participants deem as the less-than-ideal state of Buddhism in the U.S., more of them would feel comfortable claiming a Buddhist identity.

The heart of participants' critique toward Buddhism in the U.S. lies in cultural premises of what is valued, as expressed in their identity discourse. Acknowledgment of the critical role of Asians and AAs in both the establishment of Buddhism in the U.S. and its development in the American cultural and religious landscape forms the ethical juncture (Carbaugh, 1989) through which they evaluate how Buddhism is doing in the U.S. at this moment. They would like not only acknowledgment but also for Buddhism in the U.S. to be grounded in Asian culture, context, and history at large. This is mainly reflected in their call for a return to Buddhist teachings, philosophy, and values, as opposed to what they deem a commercialized and empty version that exists in U.S. mainstream culture. As Frankie commented, even with its various lineages, there is not really a "Western" form of Buddhism that could legitimately be separated from Asia.

Contrary to Frankie's comment, recent studies (Fields, 1998; Seager, 2012; Storhoff & Whalen-Bridge, 2010; Williams & Queen, 1999) have confirmed that Buddhism in the U.S. has a distinct form, which distinguishes it from other forms of Buddhism around the world. Its characteristics include the following: (a) It is largely a layperson's movement (as opposed to being heavily reliant on the monastic tradition, as is found in some parts of Asia); (b) it is based on strenuous mindfulness training known as *vipassana*; (c) it embraces Western psychology; (d) it is shaped by feminist thought pertaining to gender equality; (e) it harbors impetus toward social action; and (f) it contains democratic and antiauthoritarian/antihierarchical sentiments (Fields, 1998). This form of "American Buddhism," then, is individualistic, egalitarian, and psychologically oriented, and it based on democratic ideals and values. In other words, contrary to Frankie's comment, Buddhism in the U.S. has a distinctly "Western" flavor.

Participants expressed concern over the lack of acknowledgment of AAs in mainstream discourse on the development of Buddhism in the U.S. This follows hard on the heels of an almost three decades-long debate between Asian and non-AA Buddhists on the issue of AAs' role in establishing and developing the religion on U.S. soil. The controversy was ignited by an article written by Helen Tworkov, the former editor of *Tricycle*, one of the most prominent Buddhist periodicals in the U.S. In 1991, Tworkov wrote that "the spokespeople for Buddhism in America have been, almost exclusively, educated members of the white middle class". Tworkov (1991) then went even further, saying that AAs "have not figured prominently in the development of something called American Buddhism". At the heart of this struggle is a distinction between continuity and change (Nattier, 1998). For AAs, transmission of Buddhism to the U.S. is highly important. Without AAs, the religion wouldn't be in the U.S. in the first place. Tworkov (1991), on the other hand, distinguishes between transmission and adjustment of the religion into mainstream U.S. culture. In other words, transmission is not enough. The product itself has to be repackaged to suit mainstream preferences.

While repackaging a religion to suit a local context is common practice when it comes to the spreading of world religions (Bediako, 2000; Lie, 2018; Sanneh, 2003), the issue that participants in this study have with how Buddhism has been "repackaged" (i.e., culturally appropriated) in a U.S. socio-cultural context involves both its separation from its Asian heritage and its rampant commercialization. Nothing is more indicative of these two features than how the practice of mindfulness has been appropriated to U.S. mainstream culture. Although Buddhism is not the only religion that propagates meditation, mindfulness is often considered as the heart of Buddhist meditation (Sun, 2014). The most popular iteration of the practice in the U.S. is the health program known as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), which was created by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1979. Kabat-Zinn developed an "'American vocabulary' to make meditation commonsensical and relatable" (Sun, 2014, p. 403) to the U.S. mainstream population. His goal was to make meditation accessible for a large number of Americans, yet one wonders at what cost. In her critique of Kabat-Zinn's version of secular mindfulness, Hsu (2016) notes how it "erases the sustained efforts of Asian and AA Buddhists in maintaining the teachings [in the U.S.] over time . . . often in the face of immense discrimination" (p. 373). She also mentions how programs like MBSR contain within them the use of Western science to "validate" a practice that has been cultivated in various parts of Asia for thousands of years. In other words, it has been "sterilized" of its "exotic" Asian ties in order to make it more "palatable" for its (mostly) White American adherents.

Proponents of secular mindfulness insist that having the practice be a gateway to Buddhism, a "stealth" or "disguised" form of the religion as it were, is not necessarily a deplorable development (Sun, 2014). After all, one does not attract a potential practitioner by heavy-handedly presenting complex Buddhist teachings and philosophy sans context. Instead, one starts by addressing an immediate concern of an individual by imparting to him or her basic techniques of mindfulness meditation, only to later present teachings related to the practice itself. In other words, proponents argue for a skillful *recontextualization*, rather than a *decontextualization*, of Buddhist thoughts and practice (Sun, 2014, p. 408), which has so far aided the successful introduction of Buddhist ideas into U.S. mainstream culture. Yet, for participants in this study, Buddhism in the U.S. has, in fact, been decontextualized to the point where it is no longer connected to its Asian roots and the millions of Asians and AAs whose deep and specific connection to the religion (Hsu, 2017) has been denied and subsequently erased from current conversations on Buddhism in America and its future development.

From MBSR and the secularization of mindfulness by Kabat-Zinn sprouted other meditation courses and self-help books for sale. Many of these books highlight scientific benefits of mindfulness meditation and how it can be used to achieve individual happiness and peace of mind. Capitalizing on the popularity of mindfulness in mainstream U.S. culture, all of them were written for profit. Of note for its commercialization of mindfulness, as well as its complete erasure of Asian influence on the practice, is ABC news anchor Dan Harris's *New York Times* bestseller titled *10% Happier: How I Tamed the Voice on My Head, Reduced Stress Without Losing My Edge, and Found Self-Help that Actually Works—A True Story*. In it, Harris (2014) mentions the "issue" of "cultural baggage" carried by mindfulness meditation and how, if his readers can move past it, they will find that "meditation is simply exercise for [one's] brain" (p. xiv). As Hsu (2016) points out, even from the title itself, we can see how Harris credits his success

to his own efforts, instead of acknowledging the Asian legacy in establishing and sustaining this practice in the U.S. and other parts of the world.

The constant theme of a struggle for legitimacy and acknowledgment among participants in this study points to one crucial aspect of U.S. mainstream society: the racial structure and hierarchy upon which everyone in the country is placed and stratified (Omi & Winant, 1994). While popular notions of race are usually based on biology, it seems fitting for this analysis, as we make sense of participants' criticism toward Buddhism in the U.S., that I evoke Omi and Winant's (1994) definition of race as "both an element of social structure and an invention of cultural representation" (p.56). The combination of race as both structure and representation, in turn, connects "what race means in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized…" (p.56).

Conceptualized this way, it makes sense why participants are critical of the representation of Buddhism in the U.S. The representation of Buddhism in the U.S. as scientific, neutral, and free of "cultural baggage" indexes (Ochs, 1990) a racial structure and hierarchy that, to this day, still excludes AAs from mainstream American society (Cheah, 2011; Hsu, 2016; Lum & Harvey, 2018). Not only are they stratified below White Americans when it comes to everyday social privileges, their racialized physique also still connotes the "perpetual foreigner" (Ebers-Martinez & Dorraj, 2009) stereotype, which taints their legitimacy in claiming an American identity.

Connecting this positionality back to the question that started this whole inquiry, whether they feel comfortable claiming a Buddhist identity in their daily social lives, one could see how the two are interconnected. A White American claiming a Buddhist identity would never have to worry about justifying his or her American-ness. An AA, on the other hand, has to consider the possibility of the identity term "Buddhist" being used to further highlight his or her otherness, since his or her claim of being a "real American" is precarious to begin with. It is understandable, then, why participants in this study greatly value the acknowledgment of Asian heritage or influence in Buddhism in the U.S. Acknowledgment of "Asian-ness" in Buddhism in the U.S. equates to acknowledgment of AA people, their cultural influence, and how they have always been part and parcel of U.S. American society (Hsu, 2017).

Conclusion

This study began as my modest attempt to understand how AA Buddhists see themselves fitting into the Buddhist landscape in the U.S. What I found, instead, was a cultural criticism of what AA Buddhists deem as the less-than-ideal state of Buddhism in the U.S. Critique of Buddhism in the U.S. has a lot to do with how this world religion has been adjusted into the local U.S. context. Adjustments criticized by participants in this study include the hollowing of the religion from its original philosophical teachings and, by extension, its Asian cultural heritage. In order to develop a distinctly American version of Buddhism that meets participants' standards, those who are at the forefront of efforts to establish the religion in the American spiritual landscape would have to address the following three issues: (a) cultural appropriation of an Asian religion and the erasure of its accompanying cultural heritage; (b) capitalistic tendencies to package and sell meaningful Buddhist practices, such as mindfulness meditation, as commodities, emptied of their original teachings and central philosophies; and (c) the continued

existence of a rigid racial structure in the U.S. in which AAs are still considered as outsiders and perpetual foreigners.

Given how world religions tend to assimilate and adapt into the local culture they enter, it is inevitable that, moving forward, Buddhism in the U.S. is going to become more and more Americanized. The question is whether this particular form of Buddhism is going to be more inclusive of *all* Americans. As of now, "the public voice of . . . Buddhism [in the U.S.] remains overwhelmingly that of Euro-Americans, who often proceed as if oblivious to immigrants as an intrinsic part of America's emerging Buddhism" (Seager, 2012, p. 6). Ideally, both communities would find a way to work together in the "future production of Westernized and Americanized dharma" (Seager, 2012, p. 6). Even more ideal would be the inclusion and participation of Buddhists of all races and ethnicities in said future production. In the meantime, at least for participants in this study, acknowledgment of their contributions and a rightful place in mainstream conversations regarding the future development of Buddhism in the U.S. is a good start.

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