

## Reconceptualizing Spirituality for the Modern World

Some scattered notes -- it's really a broad issue.

When reading about how Buddhism can be adapted to a modern western world, I often wonder if I'm reading more about cross-cultural issues than anything else. A lot of what we might call "adaptation" is just straight-forward misappropriation (not that misappropriation is necessarily a bad thing) -- for example, I'm thinking about a talk I recently attended where calm abiding meditation (samatha) seemed to be equated with "experiential" understanding and insight meditation (vipassana) with intellectual or philosophical understanding. I'm pretty sure this parallel is being made because in the West we do tend to frame our understandings as intellectual or experiential (and always with reference to a knowing self) and for us, it's important to include both sides. But I'm pretty sure this is not how a traditional Buddhist would divvy up the terms, and it does make me wonder how I myself may have skewed basic terms through the filter of a radically different starting point.

Likewise, the issues around deities -- although I'm sympathetic to the those who would like to study Buddhism (or Christianity for that matter) without a blind belief in supernatural beings (the scientific view rejects superstition), I've actually come to be quite grateful that deities continue on as part of the Buddhist tradition, as representatives of another way of being.

It's also interesting to think about what it means to be part of a modern spiritual community -- questions about what it means to be a lay practitioner (rather than a monk or hermit), and also part of a community of people who grew up with democratic institutions rather than an agrarian based monarchy. My first encounter with organized spiritual activities was with Catholicism (as a kid) and martial arts (as a college student), and in both cases, I rebelled pretty strongly against the old-fashioned hierarchical structures that these systems employed -- I still think I was right. Still, there's something interesting about being forced into another community's way of doing things -- seeing the way that "individuality" and "self-determination" become a stand-in for stubbornness; also interesting to see how far we can push notions of distributed or communal wisdom before it turns into conventional wisdom on "well-socialized behavior".

I think part of what makes Buddhism so valuable to us right now is that it is \*different\* -- a real challenge to the (western) status quo. If only for this reason, I question the notion that "adapting Buddhism to the modern world" is going to be beneficial across the board.