

Buddha Bars

In the city of Los Angeles, there are numerous Buddha bars. These are high-end restaurant bars decorated with giant Buddha statues or pictures. The most recent case was a restaurant in Los Angeles opened by a Japan-born owner that had a very large representation of the Buddha behind the bar. A favorable article about this Buddha bar appeared in the Los Angeles Times. Last year, the Times had a large article in the Food Section of the Buddha bars in Los Angeles. The article praised these bars and did not even consider that it might be offensive to Buddhists. One of our Senshin members wrote a letter to the person who wrote the article and protested its bad taste and strongly urged the reporter to remove the picture from the online article – which was done. Many would say “What’s the big fuss, I have a Buddha on my key chain, I have a statue at home and rub its belly for good luck”, etc., etc. Question! What if someone opened a bistro or restaurant with a Moses Bar, or Jesus Bar, or Muhammad Bar, would that be o.k.? I think not. Why is it then that the Buddha, or Confucius, or Lao Tze for that matter, are fair game for this patronizing ridicule? J-A Buddhists especially, seem over-accommodating to this general attitude, some even to the point of defending the general attitude. It is yet another case of J-A’s buying into the definition of what and who we are - definitions made by other people, not by ourselves. This is especially the case with J-A Buddhists. We have been so programmed by others that we can only appreciate our own religion to the degree that others appreciate and approve it. The more our Buddhism agrees with what is currently popular in regards to religion, culture, and spirituality, the more we believe Buddhism to be valid.

But what about differences? Do we believe in the old American myth that wealth and prosperity is proof of our deep religiosity? As Buddhists, can we go along with the American values of wanting to possess things, and believing that buying and possessing things can make me happy; of wanting to become increasingly more comfortable at the cost of everything else; of wanting to celebrate a death but avoiding any reference to it in life; of thinking in terms of others being for us or against us; of needing to be the very best in everything; of winning at all costs; of “my way or the highway” etc., etc.? I think not.

Much of what we once had has been taken over by our American half. The sportsmanship emphasis of Judo, Kendo, and Karate that we grew up with has succumbed to full contact this and full contact that – to “see who really is the best”. Our traditional contact with death, dying, and memorial services that made life and death inseparable are now showing the cracks of doubt, fear, and trembling in the face of death. The attitude of preparing to greet death is being replaced by how to deny and cheat death. Our organizational genius for consent and cooperation has been increasingly replaced by rules of order, themes, slogans and orders from the top. We have separated theory from practice and reduced this traditional oneness to theoretical babble vs emotional tantrums.

But in spite of all of this, we are still healthy enough to mistrust instant accomplishments. To mistrust believing that you can become a master of anything after 10 years of study and practice, especially of enlightenment or big awakenings. We still know that the problem of death is not death, but how we die. We know that what goes around, comes around, and as some Christians say “there is nothing new under the sun”. We still believe that age brings wisdom and deeper religious understanding. We know that try as we may to resist it, each phase of our lives naturally become something else, like it or not. We still instinctively know that I myself am right and wrong, giving and stingy, strong and weak, intelligent and incredibly stupid, morally upright and shamefully self-serving, etc., etc., like Shotoku Taishi’s proverbial ring without end. And in this awakening I am made to float through life in appreciation and wonder. This Dharma is represented by the Buddha, and it is an object of reverence – not worship. Hence, to have a Buddha bar is not blasphemous – it’s just in extremely unthinking bad taste. Thank you Mr. Senshin member for sending that letter.

Rev. Moo