

PERSPECTIVE: Buddhism American Style

By JOE NEWMAN

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In Joe Newman's opinion, talking and thinking about Buddhism in a manner that reflects American cultural values will allow our movement to speak to the hearts of more people.

Whenever a mind is simple and receives a divine wisdom, then old things pass away — means, teachers, texts, temples fall; it lives now, and absorbs past and future into the present hour.... If therefore a man claims to know and speak of God and carries you backward to the phraseology of some old mouldered nation in another country, in another world, believe him not. Is the acorn better than the oak which is its fulness and completion? Is the parent better than the child into whom he has cast his ripened being? Whence then this worship of the past?

— “Self-Reliance,” by Ralph Waldo Emerson

The people who brought Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism to America were Japanese, and the debt of gratitude we owe them is immense. It was only natural that these pioneers would communicate to us in a way that reflected their cultural values. I feel, however, that most of us assumed that these values are inseparable from Buddhism. Most of them are not. Even so, I feel many of us have built Japanese cultural values into the way we think and talk about Buddhism, and into the SGI-USA.

During the past four years I have found great value in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, particularly his essay “Self-Reliance.” It speaks to me about many of the core beliefs of Buddhism in a language that is powerfully American, powerfully my own.

Emerson was one of the United States' first philosophers. He is also the father of the first entirely American literary movement, Transcendentalism. Some Transcendentalist authors who followed included Thoreau, Whitman and Melville. Transcendentalist writings express some of the most important and deeply felt American cultural values and ideas. What's more, many Transcendentalist ideas mirror those of our Buddhist movement. For instance, Transcendentalism holds that the essence of life and the universe expresses itself in all things and all people — nothing is separate from this life force.

Emerson speaks about life and belief in a language that reflects cherished American values: independence, non-conformity, directness and self-reliance. Using these values as his base, Emerson teaches us how to recognize, think and live the belief that divinity/God (Buddhahood) is seated at the core of our own lives.

By contrast, Japanese cultural values, from what I've experienced, are different, emphasizing conformity rather than individuality and maintaining harmony rather than making waves.

I don't mean to suggest that one set of cultural values is better than another. I do assert, however, that if we wish to truly communicate Buddhism in America, we must learn to do so in a manner that reflects American values.

When we do so, we will make the SGI-USA more powerfully effective and attractive in America because it will speak loudly to the heart of those values that we appreciate most.

I believe that studying our American philosophers will help us do just this.

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Title: Perspective: Buddhism American Style

Subject: World Tribune 07/31/98 n.3202 p.14 WT980731p14 Venice, California

Author: Joe Newman

Keywords: American California December July Opinion Perspectives Style Tribune Venice World