

Philosopher on the road to the heart of things Buddhist

By Clare Innes

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"Doctor Who" meets "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" in this lively and unholy pilgrimage through Cambodia.

Stephen T. Asma was a thirtysomething professor of philosophy and interdisciplinary humanities at Columbia College in Chicago when in 2003 he was invited to teach a graduate seminar to Cambodian students at the Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh. In "The Gods Drink Whiskey: Stumbling Toward Enlightenment in the Land of the Tattered Buddha," Asma takes us through this bewildering, war-torn country in search of traces of the oldest form of Buddhism, known as Theravada.

Fueled with spirited fascination and wry wit, he takes us to locations that illuminate Buddhism and the culture that nursed it into being. No stranger to the purest forms of reverence, his moving description of meeting the Venerable Maha Ghosananda, the holiest man in Cambodia, will make your fingertips tingle.

Along the way, Asma navigates a choppy emotional sea at the infamous Killing Fields from the Pol Pot regime. At another historical hot spot, he contemplates the street corner where, in 1963, the Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc sat in seeming placid meditation as he immolated himself, a scene seared into the memory of anyone who has seen the famous newspaper photograph.

We accompany Asma and some friends on an alcohol-soaked visitation to a back-alley massage parlor. Fear not: Our hero (whose pregnant wife awaits him back in Chicago) submits only to a massage, but we get to ride around inside his head as he watches his pals, one by one, disappear behind the curtains in these dark, slightly ominous little places.

Asma uses the experience to probe the labyrinthine rationales of the sex industry, its existence as the best and worst of how women survive in a society where men demonize women for causing their own cravings, and the loopholes of Buddhism where, technically, "activities and life choices are always weighed pragmatically as to whether they contribute to or detract from dukka [suffering], and the answer to that evaluation largely depends on who is asking."

No wonder the gods drink whiskey.

Intoxicants are on the blacklist for Buddhists, however, and Asma savors one of the paradoxes that lies at the heart of Buddhism in Cambodia.

Animistic Brahmanism flavors Buddhism with a belief in troublemaking spirits that inhabit buildings, trees, roads, and so on. Travel anywhere in Cambodia and you will see little spirit houses built in hopes of enticing the spirits to live there, rather than on farms, in businesses or homes, or even Buddhist temples, where it is believed they cause misfortune. Typical offerings include incense, flowers, and precious trinkets. But if you really want to get on the good side of these spirits, you leave them a shot of whiskey.

Asma goes on to survey Buddhist temples containing the purported tooth and eyebrow of the Buddha, whose cremated remains were scattered throughout Asia. Twelve of these 2,500-year-old relics have been gathered for permanent exhibit at the United Nations headquarters in New York. They can be seen on Vesak Day, the holiest in the Buddhist calendar, commemorating the day of the Buddha's enlightenment, which falls on the full moon in May.

Asma, author of "Buddha for Beginners" (1996) and "Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads: The Culture and Evolution of Natural History Museums" (2003), sharply details his distaste for what he calls "California Buddhism," a "neutered" form of Zen Buddhism that many Westerners who consider themselves practicing Buddhists embrace without comprehending its most basic underpinnings.

"Often the stuff that passes for 'Eastern' in the West would be unrecognized in the East," he writes. "Eastern ideas in the West float about like little self-esteem life-preservers."

He explores the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence at a site where monstrous banyan trees spill over the crumbling temples of Ta Phrom "at glacial speed, over the tops of the temple walls, wrapping around pillars, and pouring into the nooks and crannies between the bricks. Teratological rhizomorphic tentacles grow over the ruins. . . . Green creeping vines bubble out of every crevice and embrace the collapsing sandstone architecture."

In the end, Asma finds a "transcendental everydayness" that helps guide modern-day Buddhists and lends him a resonance of his own.

"The atmosphere is so thick with unfamiliarity that I couldn't help but be rapt in infantlike wonder all the time," he writes of daily life in Cambodia. As he sits in a streetside cafe, "an elephant lumbered by slowly, and a man with no legs or lower torso rolled up on a cart and took my shoes off for shining, and a snack plate of barbecued insects appeared on the table -- and then the streets might literally flood in minutes with monsoon rains. I had to practice mindfulness by necessity."

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