

# **Eastern Buddhism and Western ethics: An interview with Robert Florida**

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## Eastern Buddhism and Western Ethics: An Interview with Robert Florida

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An interview with Robert E. Florida, Emeritus Fellow at the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria. He took early retirement from Brandon University, where he was Professor of Religion and Dean of Arts, at the end of December 1999. Most of his recent publication has been in the area of

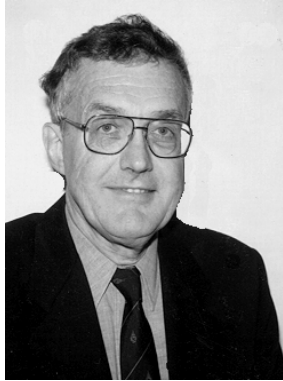


Fig. 1: Robert Florida

Buddhist ethics, particularly health care ethics. He has a Ph.D. in Religion from McMaster University and has done extra work on Buddhism at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado; at the East–West Centre at the University of Hawaii in Honolulu; and at Mahidol University in Bangkok. As a participant observer, he has experience in Thai, Tibetan, and Zen Buddhist communities.

Dr. Florida is presently working on a book for Greenwood Press on Buddhism and Human Rights. Interested readers could consult his chapter on Buddhism and abortion in Damien Keown's *Contemporary Buddhist Ethics* (London: Curzon, 2000).

Steve Bentheim (SB): Your focus is on Buddhism and ethics. Unlike Western religious traditions, Buddhism is without a central leadership. Can we identify Buddhism in a central way?

Robert Florida (RF): Probably not. My focus is to take general principles cited in cultural, historical, or personal context. One cannot talk about them in the abstract, but try to locate them in place and time.

SB: So we are focusing both on historical and contemporary aspects of Buddhism as practised worldwide?

RF: Yes.

SB: Is the conception of 'ethics' one that is taken from any specific Western model or theorists?

RF: No, ethics as it is generally understood.

SB: In early Indian Buddhist society, was there both a religious and social order?

RF: Well, the Buddha came into an existing social order and did not try to change it. He was not trying to change the order but was critical of it. He withdrew and set up a separate social order, a monastic community that was dependent on the larger community. This was going on concurrently with other religious movements. *Shramana* are withdrawn ascetics, world renouncers.

SB: The Buddhist model of an ideal social ruler – the '*dharmachakra* king' (wheel–turning king) – was this an ideal solely in India or did it travel wherever Buddhism went?

RF: It became the model and the dominant model in Southeast Asia.

SB: Would you describe the model for us?

RF: The king doesn't rule by force of arms, but by righteousness and by following the *dharm*a. By his example, people will not use excessive force and will live according to the *dharm*a.

SB: This sounds needed in today's world, too. In Buddhist countries, would it have been the role

of monks to advise or chastise the king or rulers to follow this ideal?

RF: In general, Buddhist monks were to keep a safe distance from the rulers, but they were to teach if asked. This has remained so today.

SB: In your study of Buddhism in Japan in the late nineteenth century, during the Meiji Dynasty, you stipulate that Buddhist teachers influenced the Emperor to make war on other lands.

RF: They collaborated. The emperor was more a figurehead and it was the architects of the modern state that declared war. After the United States had opened Japan in the 1850s the Meiji Restoration modernized, and in 1895 they fought the Chinese, and in 1905 they beat the Russians. This was all prior to the Second World War. Brian Victoria has most recently brought this into focus. In Sri Lanka, the problem with the Tamils was formulated with Buddhist idealogues as a 'holy war' for a 'purer' Buddhism.

SB: Would you attribute the opening of Japan by the United States as a Western influence directly influencing Buddhist clergy?

RF: The Buddhists were never pacifistic in Japan. Monks in Japan have gone to war from time to time.

SB: So somewhere, Buddhism changed the model of the *dharmachakra* king.

RF: When clergy began to meddle with affairs of state, such as in Sri Lanka and Japan, things turned awry.

SB: Not unlike our Western legacy of the marriage of church and state.

RF: These comparisons are not easy to make. It's hard enough to understand what's going on in each Buddhist country.

SB: Another area of ethical interest has been your writing on women's rights in Buddhist countries.

RF: Buddhism doesn't try to radically reform society, but on the whole, where they've had influence, the status of women was improved from what had been previously. They have a much better record than their non-Buddhist neighbours in Asia.

SB: If Buddhism primarily focused on monastic observance, how did this impact householder-women?

RF: It gave them an option other than being a wife and mother – to become a nun, which I believe was liberating. Nuns were always the spiritual equals of monks, and their enlightenment was acknowledged from the beginning.

SB: You've also noted in your book that under Buddhism women could choose not to marry at all.

RF: This was an especially emancipating position in China.

SB: What are some current ethical issues in Buddhist countries?

RF: The same as in the West: economic development, social justice, health care and reproduction, the status of women, war and violence.

SB: Are there any Western ethical frameworks that are hard for people to accept as Buddhists?

RF: Yes. Traditional Buddhists had no concept of human rights, one of the cornerstones of modern Western life.

SB: Has Buddhism an ethical offering for the West?

RF: I think it's best not to apply foreign models on each other. It's very difficult. In 1927, the first book on ethics in Buddhism was published by Tachibana. It was always seen more as a practice than a theory.

SB: That seems similar to the practice of *li* (kindness) in Confucianism. Alan Watts has often compared Eastern and Western spirituality.

In *Psychotherapy East and West* he speaks of his understanding of Buddhism as “liberation from the *maya* [illusoriness] of social institutions and not of the physical world.”<sup>1</sup> He presents his use of Zen Buddhism as a way to see through social relations to one's true nature – does this conform, say, to your understanding of Buddhism?

RF: All schools of Buddhism have a notion of two levels of truth – the first level is the penetrating insight into the ultimate nature of things, and sees things as they really are – and from that level the temporal things are not as important – one must see through them. But the second level of truth is that there is some truth in the temporal realm – certain kinds of hierarchies and structures are necessary for human survival.

Buddhists were never social radicals. To take a concrete example, the Buddhists did not try to eradicate slavery in India, nor did the later Buddhists, yet they said a lot about treating subordinates with fairness and decency.

SB: We in the West are only emerging out of slavery ourselves, just some five generations back.

RF: In 1874, Thailand began the abolishment of slavery – so there's not much difference, time wise. But if you read Western writers who lived in Siam in the nineteenth century, they almost always comment that slaves were almost always treated better there than slaves in the West.

SB: Might you attribute this to the racial and religious laws in Western civilization, that might not have existed in the Far East?

RF: Yes, to some extent. Slavery in Buddhist countries was never based on race – it was most commonly from debt, or else war captives, or by court action for extreme debts. Some were ‘redeemable slaves’, others were non-redeemable, whose descendants would remain slaves.

SB: Could slaves join a Buddhist order?

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Watts, *Psychotherapy East and West* (New York: Ballantine, 1969), p. 63.

RF: No, the Buddha ruled that slaves, criminals, or those with incurable diseases could not join the order. The idea was that those with strong social obligations could not join to get away from them – they would need permission. However, of interest to me was that once in an order, everyone – whether a former butcher or an ex-king, was treated equally.

SB: Returning to Western ethics, a contemporary moral theorist, Carol Gilligan, does not focus on the taking of an ethical stance mainly on universal rights, duty and justice, as Kohlberg does, but on the more particular stance of “caring and responsibility toward others.” Does this resonate with Buddhist principles or practice?

RF: Well, yes – it's the very absolute core of Buddhist ethical thought; taking care of others. Mahāyāna Buddhism talks of taking care of others – ‘exchanging self for others’ – giving up one's selfish interests for all other beings.

SB: Is that the *bodhisattva* vow?

RF: That's part of it.

SB: From a Western perspective, do you see an aspect of egoism in choosing to negate oneself and to be the last to be saved, as is invoked in the *bodhisattva* vow?<sup>2</sup>

RF: It could be, but not if done right. I suppose it's one of the dangers.

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<sup>2</sup> The following is an example of the *bodhisattva* vow as recited in one school of Japanese Buddhism. This vow is often lengthier, but very similar in all schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

“Though the many beings are numberless,  
I vow to save them;  
though greed, hatred, and ignorance rise endlessly,  
I vow to cut them off,  
though the Dharma is vast and fathomless;  
I vow to understand it;  
though Buddha's way is beyond attainment;  
I vow to embody it fully.”

Robert Aiken, *Taking the Path of Zen* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982), p. 62.

SB: What I'm asking by this, for those who are situated in Western ego-psychology is to underscore the developmental importance of boundaries between self and other.

RF: One of the fundamental teachings of Buddhism is that all beings are co-dependent and co-produced from their very essence, so there is no boundary between self and other, so they will not truly be egoistic.

SB: Could one then say that their own self is included with other selves?

RF: Buddhists would be more likely to say, there is no difference.

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Dr. Florida may be contacted at the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society, at the University of Victoria, for the 2002-03 academic year.