

A WHITE BOY IN INDIA

THE ETHICS OF WORKING IN A FOREIGN CULTURE

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The Lepcha village of Pringpam is situated approximately 300 metres above the Reilly River. It is a collection of small one to two acre farms spread across a north facing ridgeline that descends downward to meet the river. In this semi-remote area of the Darjeeling hills it has taken us most of the day to arrive after a jeep ride and half a days walk through the jungle. I am on a small walkabout with two long time friends and students to visit their native villages and families. After a night of choking kerosene lamps, tongba, and family talk by the flickering light we awake to a day of gathering. Today the community acknowledges one hundred days from the death of a village elder. Walking from a few metres to a few kilometres village families gather at the Catholic church to talk, laugh and cook. Children run screaming and playing across the grass field. At times my stealth photography is too obvious and the children swarm demanding to be photographed and to see the photos taken. During the meal, because I am a teacher and foreigner (either one being suffice), I am seated with the priest and elders.

Later, after the dishes have been washed and everything cleaned, people gather at the adjacent community centre for a meeting that my friends have called. They work for a local NGO (non-government organization) promoting sustainable organic agricultural practices and have been working with this community for the past six years. To start the meeting, and with little warning to me, my 'friends' put me up front to say something.

So once again I find myself, a white boy from the American suburbs, a product of the dominant global industrial paradigm, in front of a room full of tribal Indian farmers in a semi-remote corner of the Himalayas as if I have something relevant to say.

As they say around here, "What to do?" What are the ethical and moral questions and pitfalls about foreigners, especially white industrialized ones, wanting to work with other cultures, in particular indigenous ones? What right do foreigners have working with and within a culture? Are good intentions enough of an ethical base from which to interact with these cultures? Or is it all just another form of neocolonialism?

WHY ARE YOU STANDING THERE?

The first, and perhaps the most important, question to ask is, 'Why do I want to go to a different culture to do this work?' Intentions are a personal reflection that have impacts in the larger context. Intentions are important because they influence, subtly and not so subtly, how you relate to the people you are interacting with. This influence will then affect the impacts you and your work have in this culture.

I want to save the world. I want to help because of guilt. I think these cultures need help to survive globalization. I want to do something important. These motivations one should be rather suspicious of in that they are focused on the self. Some are outright egocentric, while others are a slippery slope.

I want to be challenged. I want to learn. I want to understand more about other cultures. I want to be of service. These, while still having aspects of ego (what doesn't), acknowledge that it is a relationship you are becoming involved in. There is an equanimity in them.

The former set of intentions are about you doing something, while the latter ones express your willingness to have something done to you. The former ignores or negates a culture while the latter acknowledges the validity and importance of a culture.

This is of foundational importance if you are going to be interacting with other cultures. For it is out of these intentions and motivations that our actions and behaviors are formed. And while the same action can result from different intentions, the action's impacts and effectiveness will vary depending on the motivation behind it.

It is very much like teaching. Teaching itself is a fallacy. People are not taught, they learn. It is the 'teacher's' job to present the idea, technique, or information in a way that the 'student' can grasp it. It is the student's job to grasp it. No amount of force, sweet talk, bribery, or deception will teach anything to anyone if they do not want to learn, if they do not actively engage in grasping what is presented to them. It is more effective for the 'teacher' to consider themselves a facilitator in this process of learning. This allows a more dynamic relationship to manifest. One where the facilitator is as much a student as those they are interacting with. For as anyone who has 'taught' understands each student is unique in their own processes of learning, of grasping. So though the process and appearance is like that of a typical class, albeit more progressive than traditional, the intention to facilitate rather than to teach has profound effects upon how the students experience and thus engage in this process.

THE SET-UP

It is in the nature of people to project on to others. This is especially true when a foreigner is interacting in a culture very different from their own. These

projections are based upon people's personal and cultural experiences. These days there are also images, very often idealized and sensationalized, propagated by the mass media. What projections tend to do, whether they have validity or not, is to create barriers and limitations prior to any action whatsoever. They limit people and possibilities. And we all have them.

What are your projections? What assumptions, ideas, images and emotional baggage do you bring with you? It is very important that you understand these if you want to interact with a foreign culture in an open regenerative way. As with intentions, one need not be squeaking clean. However, the more you have personal clarity, the more you will be able to choose what to base your actions upon. The more aware you are of your projections the easier it will be for you to step beyond them. And even if images remain in your psyche you are more able to see them for what they are, constructs. The appropriateness of your actions, therefore their effectiveness, is directly related to this personal clarity.

Your effectiveness is also related to how well you understand the views, images and projects that a people have of you. While some of these may seem unfair, or even bizarre, they are a reality for these people. Some of these, perhaps all of them, may well have a kernel or more of truth in them. It is quite often difficult to see the difference between a projection and a perception. One does not need to take them on, nor validate them, however, they can be a very useful mirror to better understand how our own actions may re-enforce these projects and affect this culture.

As with so many things bringing this to light is often the best way to handle situations where projections can negatively influence how people perceive you and your intentions, thus your impacts in a community or culture. In doing this it is important that one does not negate or disparage. In doing such one is perceived as judging and thus placing themselves above others. Implicit in this is hierarchy and separation. I have found that humor is a powerful tool when welded with skill and kindness. A humor that is about the situation or oneself rather than about the community or culture.

In the situation described in the beginning of this article or when one is 'teaching' ideas, techniques and strategies that one thinks will benefit these people, there are at least two 'perceptions' that are commonly repeated in so many cultural interactions.

Due to the global history of colonization when a person of European descent stands in front of a group from the majority world, especially when their culture has only recently achieved independence, it is inevitable that perceptions and remembrances of this will be present. While completely understandable, this perception can only be a hindrance and limitation to whatever interaction is to take place. It is also an excellent reflection for the person interacting with this culture to probe deeply their motivations and intentions.

Concurrent with this is the expectation that the person standing in front of them is an 'expert' who will tell them the right thing to do. This is both a remnant

of colonization and re-enforced by the on going push of globalization. It is strongly disempowering. It fosters a feeling that ones culture is inferior, thus promoting cultural erosion. This expectation can well be considered a type one failure in that it builds a greater dependancy on resources exterior to a community and culture.

I have found that it is most functional to immediately address these perceptions by being specific about my intentions and limitations while validating the importance of cultural knowledge and integrity. Who am I, a white boy from the American suburbs, to know what is appropriate for their specific culture and environment? Who understands better the impacts something will have? Who's right is it to say that this is important, that is not? I tell them that I am here to assist them. That I offer them ideas, understandings, techniques, and strategies, and they need to decide what is important, how to adapt these for their environment, how these can support their community and culture.

In presenting myself and what I offer in this way I am offering to work in partnership with them. A partnership where ultimately they are the ones in control.

BY WHAT RIGHT

An argument could be made that even with all of the previous understandings and approaches what right does a person from one country have interacting in this way in another country. This argument is made stronger when considering an industrialized foreigner interacting with a traditional indigenous culture. This argument is important and everyone who wants to do work of this nature should never ignore, lessen, nor forget it. The response to this, as with so many things, is a matter of scale and perspective.

To start the argument one could site the story of the mother asking Gandhi to tell her son not to eat sugar. As a matter of integrity one should embody the action itself before telling others to act in such a way. It is a valid point. If you are facilitating the import of permaculture ideas and practices into a place you had best be practicing them at home and on the road. This is especially true considering the impacts of global travel and the current state of our planet. It is also important to understand that not eating sugar is a simpler task than reshaping one's entire life and interactions so that everything one does is regenerative. For all of us integrating sustainable practices into our lives is an ongoing process. If one waits to do anything else until one's life is perfectly regenerative in our industrialized world than one would be doing nothing else but working exclusively on one's life. The point is to be working on multiple levels simultaneously. One needs to always consider how they can do things more appropriately within their own life while engaging in the work of assisting others to do the same.

Would it not be more appropriate to work in one's own community and

one's own country than to fly to the other side of the world? Yes, if one was not working in one's own country and community. However, it is quite possible to work on multiple levels that span a wide geographical scale. Granted, it is a more challenging and demanding scale to work on. It is also a scale that demands that one's work balances or exceeds the impacts that are inherent in it. The point is that creating a sustainable human environment requires work on all scales, local to global.

What needs to be clearly articulated in conjunction with the above is that if one wishes to engage on a larger scale, particularly a globe spanning one, one needs to start from their own doorstep. Practice and learn in your own home, on your own land. Concurrent with this or growing out of it work in your community with local groups and organizations. If they are none than organize one. Get as much experience as you can before even considering scaling up beyond this. A building is only as strong as it's foundation is a cliché because it is so persistently true. Untold damage and lost opportunities can result from someone who, with all good intentions, works within a foreign culture, especially an indigenous one, without the years of experience necessary to understand and present the plethora of concepts, techniques and strategies that constitute permaculture and sustainability. This presentation is challenging enough within one's own culture. To do it in a culture, and perhaps language, that is significantly different from one's own is a complex undertaking that requires skill, sensitivity, humbleness, and keen observation coupled with a persistent self-reflection.. One need not be a certified 'expert', few of us are. What one needs is a strong wide base to continue to learn and grow from as one moves into this very rewarding and demanding work. The learning never ends. It is the competence that is of importance here. As one's competence grows so does their ability to do larger scale work. To move into this level of engagement it is strongly recommended that one partners with one of the many excellent organizations that are doing the work that one has a passion for. Research not only the projects they are doing and have completed, but also understand their ethical and philosophical foundations.

This still does not address the core question of what right one has to interact and influence a different culture or country. This level of consideration simply misses the point. Regardless of your cultural beliefs and practices, of what you love and desire, your political and social philosophies, or where you sleep, eat, and shit we all live on the same planet. Regardless of political boundaries or limited areas of action everything is connected within the boundaries of our limited physical world. Individual, community, cultural and corporate practices and actions are having more and more impacts on a global scale. This is not to say nor justify that one has a blanket right to dictate what or what not a person or people can do. However, we all need to be involved in creating and living in a sustainable regenerative fashion if we are going to have a healthy planet. This is why at times it may be necessary for a skillful intervention regarding a particular cultural practice.

Consider jhum cultivation. Historically slash and burn agriculture developed over a wide span of time evolving out of culture and environment. It was both appropriate and sustainable, benefiting community and environment. Today, except perhaps in a few very remote areas, this practice is no longer environmentally sustainable due to increased populations and a greatly decreased land base. In fact, in many areas of the world today this cultural and agricultural practice is causing negative impacts far beyond its area of use, from species loss to contributing to climate change. Yet it is a deeply rooted cultural component for certain traditional indigenous communities.

What to do? There is no one answer or solution. However, there is an approach that provides great potential in creating solutions that are both environmentally and culturally appropriate, and therefore, the most likely to succeed and endure. This is to engage and empower those closest to the situation with the task of creating an alternative. Through engaged partnership and respect for a community's inherent intelligence and understandings site specific solutions empower a culture to have a more global perspective while validating their place within it. Specifically, look to local organizations such as NGOs, CBOs (community based organizations), and SHGs (self help groups). If these are not present work with concerned and respected community members to form such groups.

Key to this partnership are two essential baseline strategies; education and access.

Education is one of the greatest tools for empowerment. An education that recognizes the beauty and functionalities within the culture by articulating why these are so. Layered on to this foundation is the introduction of understandings, ideas and skills that will provide the community with the ability to make decisions and create solutions to the challenges that face them.

An all too often limiting factor to a community's ability to address the challenges facing it is one of access to information and resources. Partnered with education access greatly increases a community's ability to create solutions, elevating their sense of empowerment, while engaging them in a wider global context. As a result of this self respect, cultural pride and the belief in their ability to face the challenges of our world increases.

WHAT ARE YOU CARRYING?

Due to political and corporate globalization there is not a place nor culture in our world that is not being impacted. The question is not if globalization will happen, rather, it is what will globalization's impacts be on the diverse cultures and environments of our planet? Many communities and cultures welcome the obvious components of this globalization. Road access, electricity, and mobile phones benefit a community in many fundamental ways. They also present direct and indirect challenges to cultural integrity. The point is, even if we could,

what right do we have to deny a people these, or for that matter, television, gameboys, lazy boys, and electric can openers? The desire to 'protect' a culture, no matter how well intentioned, is just another form of neocolonialism. The challenge is to understand the impacts, both positive and negative, globalization will have within a particular culture.

This is not to say that one needs not be aware of what one exposes a culture too. Just because one acknowledges their right of choice does not mean it is appropriate or ethical to give them lazy boys and gameboys. Similarly, possession and use of technologies and devices is seen as an endorsement of them. The display of these also articulates the economic differences between one's culture and theirs, which due to global economics can be very significant. It further emphasizes the privileges that are to be had in a culture different from their own. What this all adds up to is that the people of a culture, especially the youth, begin to see themselves and their culture as poor and backwards. Which leads to cultural erosion and out migration.

The way a foreigner dresses and behaves influences a cultures perception of the industrialized west, how the youth perceive themselves and their culture, and impacts the effectiveness of whatever one is trying to assist the culture in achieving. As with technologies, western fashion, in particular branded fashion, and behaviors can lead to alterations in local cultural expressions, customs, and behaviors. These changes can have profound ripple effects throughout the fabric of culture which lead to displacement, erosion and loss.

Setting aside questions of morality and right or wrong, one needs to really consider why they are interacting with a culture other than their own. Is it to inoculate them with western industrialized technologies, mores and fashions, or is it to assist them with specific health, social, economic, and/or environmental challenges of our globalizing world? It is functional to remember that by matching patterns there is a much greater likelihood for success. By accepting and integrating with your host community and culture what you offer will more readily be considered and respected. This is not to say that one needs to put on a burka or accept the specific customs of a culture. It is saying that one needs to understand the cultural context in which one is working. One needs to understand as best one can the impacts and conflicts that can arise from the expression of your own cultural components. At times this can be quite challenging. At times one may strongly disagree with a component of the culture they are a guest in. In and of themselves traditional customs and behaviors are not automatically appropriate, right, or valid. While one needs to be very aware of cultural and environmental context, at times one could be presented with a situation that is unacceptable to them. If this is the case than one either leaves, or, one reconsiders why they are there. If one chooses to question or challenge a behavior or custom it should not be done lightly, casually or ignorantly. As expressed earlier, look to the community or culture itself. Look for people that understand your concerns and, perhaps, share your desire for change. If the behavior or custom raises strong emotions it is likely that there are already

organizations focusing on them. Find locally based ones, ones that are run by the people of the culture. As with all of this, your humble and skilled support of these organizations not only enriches them, it enriches you.

RETURNING HOME

So once again we return to the self. For that is truly where we really are no matter where we are in this world. Ourselves, our life and our experiences are what we carry with us as we interact with those around us. This then is an ethical base ones actions can evolve from. We of the industrialized global community bear witness to all that it is, both negative and positive. Many of the majority world look to the west, in particular the United States, in a romanticized, idealized way. Given our privileged energy and resource rich lifestyles this is perfectly understandable. What is not easily seen by these cultures are the heavy social and environmental costs for this way of life. Costs that are degrading our communities and destroying our planet. While it is helpful to express the importance of maintaining cultural integrity, one is still an outsider telling someone else what is good or not. What is much more functional is bearing witness to the costs and losses we of our own culture have suffered from this industrial, consumer paradigm. In doing this we offer our understandings, ideas, techniques and strategies learned from the process of working within the context of our life, culture, and environment.

THERE'S ALWAYS MORE

This short article in no way addresses all the various and subtle ethical questions that one will face in working with a particular culture. It has hopefully provided a foundational philosophy to build upon. As with any physical site, every community and culture will have aspects that are unique to it. As with biodiversity, cultural diversity is an essential aspect of a sustainable global community. Having respect and a beginner's mind while interacting with communities and cultures different from one's own is not only functional, it is essential. From this engaged partnership we build global relationships that validate and support diverse local cultures as important contributing members of our evolving human community.