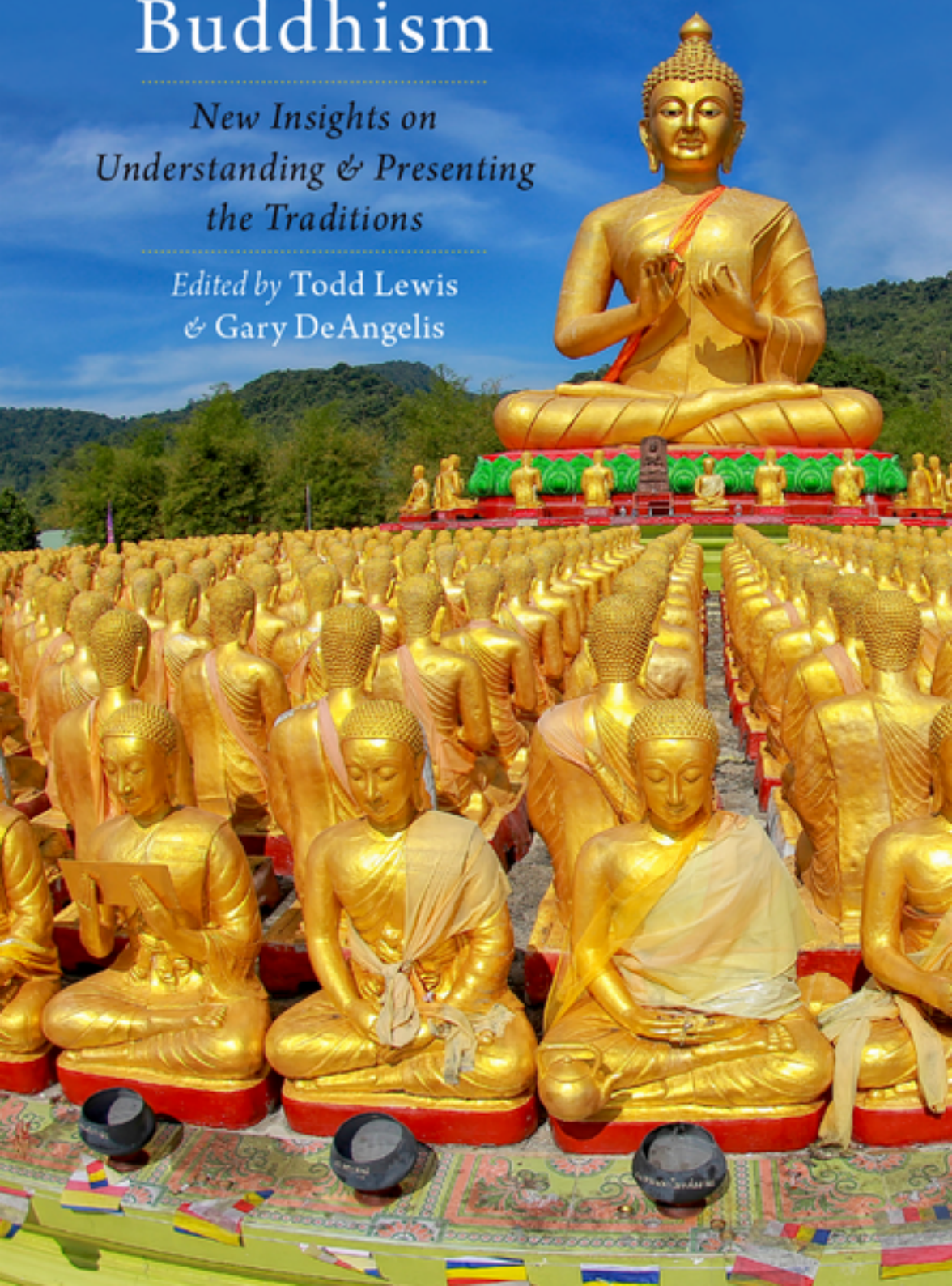


Teaching Buddhism

*New Insights on
Understanding & Presenting
the Traditions*

*Edited by Todd Lewis
& Gary DeAngelis*



Teaching Buddhism



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and Presenting the Traditions*



Edited by

TODD LEWIS
GARY DEANGELIS

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*Dedicated to the Memory of Rita Gross and Ian Harris,
and to all who have devoted their lives to understanding
the Buddha's teachings*

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Foreword

Tensions in the Field of Religious and Buddhist Studies

John S. Strong

I HAVE BEEN teaching courses on Buddhism to undergraduates for almost forty years. Now, I find myself wishing this book had been available at the start rather than the end of my career! I might earlier on have been inspired to adopt and adapt more creative approaches to the subject matter—to take certain pedagogical paths-not-imagined. Or I might also have been emboldened to offer even more focused courses on particular Buddhist topics. Or I might have been encouraged to urge my colleagues in various fields to make Buddhism something that is truly found “across the curriculum.” Not that this work could have been written in the 1970s; the field was much younger then, and the materials available to students quite limited in number and scope. This is a collection of essays written for the present, in tune with the needs and interests of faculty and students alike.

Thinking back to the books that were on the reading list of the first course I took on Buddhism at Oberlin College, in the mid-1960s, I remember: Henry Clarke Warren’s *Buddhism in Translations*; Edward Conze’s *Buddhism: its Essence and Development*; Walpola Rahula’s *What the Buddha Taught*; Winston King’s *A Thousand Lives Away*; Thich Nhat Hanh’s *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, and a pamphlet by Nyanaponika Thera on *The Power of Mindfulness*. This combination was actually pretty effective (my class was taught by an inspired and knowledgeable professor, Don Swearer), but beyond this there was little else available for class use. And the situation for Chinese and Japanese Buddhism was much worse. As for Tibet, it was still an academic *terra incognita*; as I sometimes joke—not completely accurately—to the students in my Tibetan religions class: “when I was in college, there were only four books in

English on Tibetan Buddhism—and they were all written by a single wide-eyed theosophist, W. Y. Evans-Wentz.”

Reflecting back over the teaching of Buddhism in American colleges and universities over the past half century, it may be possible to distinguish four pedagogical stages or contexts in this academic and cultural adventure, as the field has grown and interest in Buddhism has spread through Western culture. These stages, though they came about more or less successively, also continue to exist concurrently, and indeed they still all have a valued place in present-day curricula. (1) Initially, Buddhism was mostly introduced as a “unit” in more general courses on World Religions which were more often than not taught by faculty who were not specialists in Buddhism. There are two basic ways of teaching such courses: as a smorgasbord, in which various traditions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, etc.) are all laid out separately, but next to one another; or as a shish kebab, in which various “skewers” (the “skewers” of doctrine, or ritual, or community, or ethics, of religious experience, etc.) are used to string together little tidbits taken from various religious traditions, including Buddhism. (2) In time, more focused courses on Buddhism in general began to appear, sometimes dealing with the pan-Asian tradition as a whole in a single semester, sometimes divided into two courses dealing separately with southern and eastern Asia, or Theravāda and Mahāyāna. (3) With increased specialization, even more specifically focused courses on Buddhist topics or certain types of Buddhism began to be offered—courses on Zen, on Japanese or Chinese or Tibetan Buddhism, on meditation, on the life of the Buddha, on the origins of the Mahāyāna, and so on. (4) Finally, moving more toward the present day, we also find courses setting forth Buddhist perspectives on greater social issues or phenomena (such as gender, family, ethics, politics, the environment, economic development, psychology, etc.). They may do this either exclusively as the subject of a whole course (e.g., “Buddhism and Sexuality”), or as part of a cross-cultural study of such topics. In this way, Buddhist viewpoints are gradually infiltrating the general curriculum as they get applied to universal (or sometimes largely Western) concerns. Curiously, as they do, we are returning to a situation in which faculty who are not specialists in Buddhism are including Buddhist topics or perspectives in their courses.

There is thus a timely need for this book, which reflects not only changes in the field, but responds to changes in the interests and concerns of students. Comprising essays by prominent Buddhist scholars who are also master teachers, it provides us with a varied set of reflections (sometimes quite personal) and inspired models (often quite practical) about how to go about teaching American undergraduates about many aspects of the

Buddhist tradition. In doing so, it covers all four of the above contexts, but especially the third and the last. How may Buddhist lenses be used to look at philosophy, or cognitive science, or politics, or the family, or bioethics, or the environment, or social justice issues, etc.? Concomitantly, how may the lenses of philosophy, cognitive science, gender, environmental studies, and so on be used to better understand Buddhism? Here are accounts of how both of these things have been done and suggestions as to why and how to do them. The work is thus not only a narration of how “Buddhism” has been taught; it is also an eye-opener as to how it might be taught or might be learned.

Editors' Preface

ANYONE TEACHING BUDDHISM in an introductory college class inevitably presents one of its founder's core views of the world, one of three fundamental "characteristics" of reality: impermanence (Skt. *anitya*, Pali *annica*). The Buddha taught that since change is unceasing, humans must cope with this reality, and that as embodied living beings they are accordingly destined to suffer whenever favorable conditions end, with the onset of illnesses, and certainly with the inevitable arrival of old age and death. In a sense, the teaching that there is no unchanging reality (such as a soul) on which to center our lives is an extension of this doctrine. Thus, the teaching of impermanence is central to understanding the Dharma; and comprehending it thoroughly in one's life experience is essential to an individual's path toward *nirvāṇa* realization.

In many respects, all who teach Buddhism face the challenge of presenting a starting point, a cogent historical and phenomenological narrative, for their students; and so instructors must inevitably resort to (over)simplifications. Given the paucity of cumulative scholarship on this tradition, and the many and often huge gaps to date in scholars integrating and assimilating the textual, epigraphic, art historical, numismatic, and ethnographic sources that define Buddhist studies, we feel that it is simply an empirical fact that skillful teachers of Buddhism today—and for the foreseeable future—must be ready to incorporate new insights from these fields of scholarship. Furthermore, we should also be alert to including new and interesting case studies and topics in our courses such as where and how Buddhist traditions are entering Euro-American societies and where there are significant, emerging dialogs with contemporary scientific, environmental, economic, ethical, or philosophical thought.

The second arena of change that points to the necessity of updating courses on Buddhism is that our students are also an ever-changing audience. The cognitive and imaginative worlds that they inhabit are evolving so swiftly and according to existential variables no one can chart clearly either alone

or as they are interacting: vast global information instantly accessible on the Internet, communications connections providing immediate access to friends and family, immersion in these and other media that occupy an unprecedented presence in their daily lives. While college courses and curriculum may authentically and usefully preserve traditional academic approaches, methods, and insights to new generations of students, it is also undeniable that effective teachers cannot ignore the characteristics of their audience, especially now and in the coming decades when we will continue to live through unprecedented changes in the experience of students.



THIS VOLUME INVITES its readers not to remain content with “the first draft of history,” the first assemblage of facts and interpretations inherited from our teacher-scholar ancestors. However skillfully and creatively the early generations of Buddhism scholars composed their historical narratives and doctrinal interpretations, there is no doubt that there were many biases, misunderstandings, false assumptions, and misinterpretations that have needed revision. Skillful instructors utilizing this volume will find it a place to revisit some of the key frontiers of knowledge in Buddhist studies, new arenas of study and application, and numerous topics that they should certainly revise in their presentations to students. There is no good reason any more to purvey discredited historical accounts such as—to use examples cited in this book—the identification of Theravāda Buddhism with the tradition in its earliest centuries, presenting Mahāyāna Buddhism as originating among householders, using the Pali Vinaya to generalize about Buddhist monasticism as it existed across ancient and medieval India, or the notion that Buddhism was atheistic, a tradition of philosophy only, or focused only on meditation. This book, part of the AAR series on Teaching Religion, connects the imagined community of college instructors of Buddhism with the work of leading scholars who are updating, revising, and even upending earlier understandings of Buddhist traditions on a variety of scholarly horizons.



WE HAVE ARRANGED the contributions to this volume according to five somewhat arbitrary rubrics, and most chapters contain a discursive summary of the topic's subject matter, accounts from the author's classroom experience(s), and then useful bibliographies to guide further readings in each area.

In Part I “Updating Perennial Course Subjects,” Mark Siderits shares many insights about the method and effective themes he has found useful in teaching Buddhist philosophy, both on its own and in comparative courses. Roger Jackson magisterially summarizes scholarship on the writings and thought of

great and historically important Mahāyāna philosopher Nāgārjuna. William Waldron creatively conveys how recent groundbreaking studies in the cognitive sciences can be related to analyses in the Yogācāra school of Mahāyāna philosophy; and as in many other chapters in this volume, Waldron shares his experiences trying to enrich classroom discussion and student understanding. David Gray also reflects on how esoteric or Vajrayāna Buddhism can be most effectively taught in the undergraduate classroom, clarifying how he covers the trans-Asian manifestations of this tradition, handles this tradition's complexity, and deals with the simplistic images of tantric traditions in popular culture. Steven Heine concludes this part by taking the nonspecialist reader through all the topics that have proven to be problematic—or even absurdly false—in history of Westerners teaching Zen Buddhism; he also offers suggestions on course content that can straighten the deformed historiography inherited from popular culture.

Part II consists of two chapters seeking to reshape and enrich the holistic content of an introductory course on “Buddhism.” Thomas Borchert and Ian Harris argue forcefully that it is time to discard the notion that Buddhism in history was ever disconnected from the politics of the polities in which it existed, providing a broad and useful survey of this conclusion across Asia in recent centuries. Todd Lewis's chapter “Conveying Buddhist Tradition through its Rituals” provides an historical overview of the many forms of Buddhist ritualism; he argues that these practices were a part of the tradition from its origins, with rituals creatively choreographing central Buddhist ideas and moral striving until the present day.

The chapters in Part III “Issues in Teaching, Practice, and Connecting Students with the Tradition” take on topics that confront an instructor engaging with students in a variety of institutional contexts. Jan Willis candidly reflects on the challenges faced by a professor who is also a practitioner teaching in the modern secular university; she identifies problems, boundaries, and opportunities such a scholar should consider. From the opposite direction, Rita Gross eloquently explores the classroom conundrums of a historian of religion who teaches in a “Dharma Center” and who must address disciples for whom the modern academic's critiques of supernaturalism conflict with the sacred texts and a lineage's venerable traditions. The effective integration of Buddhism to courses focusing on feminism and cultural diversity is discussed by Hsiao-Lan Hu, while Gary DeAngelis shares his insights on how the holistic conceptualization of Buddhism can inform and enrich a world religions survey course.

“Buddhism and the American Context” is the theme of Part IV. Charles Prebish provides an instructive history of his own and others pioneering work to document and define this new and growing field in Buddhist studies, with an especially extensive and useful bibliography. Vanessa Sasson's chapter cogently summarizes the wealth of recent scholarship on the neglected topic of

the place of family and children in the history of Buddhism. In the last chapter of this section, Christopher Queen shares his experiences teaching Engaged Buddhism, a major modern development in many national traditions that has resonated with many Americans, especially students who increasingly do service learning as part of their undergraduate education.

The final section of this volume explores the introduction of Buddhism into new academic fields. In the arena of inter-religious dialog, Paul Ingram recounts the history of Christian–Buddhist dialogue and assesses the possibilities for its fruitful future directions. Damien Keown then shares his expertise in Buddhist ethics to identify the perspectives and issues that the tradition brings to this field, focusing especially on abortion. The cultural resources of Buddhist doctrine and the specific actions that Buddhists have taken to address environmental issues is the subject of the thorough chapter co-authored by Leslie E. Sponsel and Poranee Natadecha-Sponsel; its case studies and extensive bibliography provide instructors with valuable resources for the classroom. Laszlo Zsolnai's contribution complements the environmentalist chapter by reviewing the classical ideals of Buddhist thinkers regarding "true human needs" and recent efforts to articulate alternative economic models; here is a systematic treatment of Buddhists who reject building societies on the economics of environmental and human exploitation. In our final chapter, Anna Brown draws upon her own experience as scholar-activist to discuss the empowering richness of the tradition in critiquing the causes of suffering in the modern world; she very evocatively conveys how recent Buddhist teachers provide deep and lasting inspiration to those seeking to sustain a commitment to social justice.



OUR VIEW OF the field of Buddhist studies today has been enriched by compiling these diverse and rich contributions. One strong conclusion we have reached is that as instructors we should share the newness of the field with our students, and in some areas impart a wariness of certainty about Buddhism's origins, its institutional history, and the wisdom of skepticism when asked to turn legends into historical narrative. Unlike in biblical studies where chapters and verses have been already plowed many, many times to discern their context and meaning(s), Buddhist studies lag far behind any such certitude. Sharing this with students, we have found that they are intrigued when informed that the *sūtras* and writings we are considering are still not fully studied or understood, and they are energized when they are freely invited to give them critical scrutiny.

Our final insight derived from the process of making this volume is that instructors teaching Buddhism can act in the spirit of the bodhisattva teacher who wishes to aid his students by acting with *upāya*, "skillful

means.” The premise of this volume is that the doctrine of impermanence applies to the history of Buddhism and to the teaching of it; those wishing to teach Buddhism skillfully in college classrooms and beyond can draw upon the teaching of impermanence itself to impart insight about how all historiography works and how human beings construct the conceptual-existential worlds in which they then live. Dramatic changes in the Buddhist world, advances in scholarship on Buddhism, and developments in the globalizing world make it natural to explore new insights, topics, case studies, and innovations. We complete this volume with the conviction that it will serve those wishing to reimagine how those offering college courses can more skillfully present what is labeled “Buddhism.”

—Todd Lewis, Gary DeAngelis
Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island

Acknowledgments

THE GENESIS OF this volume began during a conversation on a sailboat gliding thru light airs across southern Narragansett Bay. Our intention that formed during a good day on the water was tested often, as with many extended voyages, during the over-long process of getting this project approved, underway, and then completed. Whenever a volume like this comes together, there are many to thank, but none more so than our contributing authors. These single-theme, multi-authored volumes, by their very nature, are usually long, drawn-out affairs and this one was no exception. Thru many fits and starts – with circumstances that at times would have tested the patience of a Buddha – our contributors never wavered in their commitment to this project. It was their commitment, and the stellar content of their essays, that sustained us both to see it through.

Reflected in these pages are not only extraordinary insights on the teaching of Buddhism from numerous perspectives, but also lifetimes dedicated to both Buddhist Studies and authentic pedagogy. Each of us in this field has benefited immensely from the work and commitment of those who have come before us; and we hope that the chapters in this volume will contribute to the work of training of the next generation of Buddhist scholars and teachers.

We are especially thankful that John Strong agreed to write a thoughtful and insightful foreword that captured the spirit of our initial inspiration on that summer day. In addition, the unwavering support of Cynthia Read at Oxford University Press was essential, as was the work of the editorial staff: Marcela Maxfield, Alyssa Russell and Alphonsa James.


We thank all those who encouraged undertaking the pedagogical work of this volume: John Holt, Leonard van der Kuijp, Gregory Schopen, Roger Jackson, and the anonymous reviewers of the book proposal. We also acknowledge, with great appreciation, a grant from the Scholarship Committee at the College of the Holy Cross that paid for the indexing.

Although this anthology gathers a wealth of new insights on Buddhism, its history, and its engagement with new academic fields, both editors nonetheless feel that their own mentors merit acknowledgement here in that they instilled a commitment to scholarly rigor and the need to question received historical interpretations: Theodore Riccardi, Ainslie Embree, Stanley Tambiah, Morton Klass for Todd and Masatoshi Nagatomi, George Rupp, William Johnson, Herbert Mason and Daud Rahbar for Gary.

20 June 2016

A Note on the Transliteration of Asian Languages

TO MAKE THE volume most useful for the nonspecialist reader, standard diacritical renderings of Sanskrit (abbreviated Skt.), Pali, and Japanese terms are employed, including long and short vowels; the only exception is *sh* used to show the palatal sibilant (usually ś) so as to retain phonetic verisimilitude.

The divider of sections within the chapters——represents a leaf of the Bodhi tree, under which the Buddha attained enlightenment.

List of Contributors

Editors

Todd Lewis is the Murray Distinguished Professor of Arts and Humanities and Professor of World Religions at the College of the Holy Cross. His primary research since 1979 has been on Newar Buddhism in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. He is the author of many articles on this tradition, as well as on the anthropology of Buddhism and the role of merchants in Buddhist history. Recent books include *Buddhists: Understanding Buddhism through the Lives of Practitioners* (2014) and *World Religions Today* (5th ed., 2014). His translation, *Sugata Saurabha: A Poem on the Life of the Buddha by Chittadhar Hridaya of Nepal* received awards from the Khyentse Foundation and the Numata Foundation as the best book on Buddhism published in 2011.

Gary D. DeAngelis teaches Asian religions in the Religious Studies Department and Asian Studies program at Holy Cross College. He is also the Associate Director of the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies. His most recent publications include: contributing co-editor with Warren Frisina, *Teaching the Daode Jing, Dictionary of Religious Studies*—the Chinese and Japanese religions entries, “Principles of Leadership in Myamoto Musashi’s *Book of the Five Rings*.”

Contributors

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Anna Brown is chair of the political science department and director of the social justice program at Saint Peter’s University. Along with James L. Marsh, she co-edited and contributed to *Faith, Resistance, and the Future: Daniel*

Berrigan's Challenge to Catholic Social Thought (2012). Anna sits *zazen* with the Morning Star community in Jersey City, NJ, and is a Zen student of Roshi Robert Kennedy, SJ. For many years, she joined Daniel Berrigan, SJ and other members of the Kairos peace community in the work of peacemaking and nonviolent civil disobedience.

David B. Gray is an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Santa Clara University. His research explores the development of tantric Buddhist traditions in South Asia, and their dissemination in Tibet and East Asia, with a focus on the *Yoginītantras*, a genre of Buddhist tantric literature that focused on female deities and yogic practices involving the subtle body. He is the author of both *The Cakrasamvara Tantra: A Study and Annotated Translation* (2007) and *The Cakrasamvara Tantra: Editions of the Sanskrit and Tibetan Texts* (2012).

Rita M. Gross (July 6, 1943–November 11, 2015) taught comparative studies in religion her entire career and practiced Buddhism for forty years. Her PhD was the first dissertation on women studies and feminist methodology in the field of religious studies. Her best known book *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (1993) had a major impact on both the practice of Buddhism and academic Buddhist studies. Her major book on gender and religion is *Feminism and Religion—An Introduction* (1996). In the latter portion of her career, Dr. Gross focused on religious diversity. Her most recent book is *Religious Diversity—What's the Problem? Buddhist Advice for Flourishing with Religious Diversity* (2014). She also taught Buddhist meditation and dharma.

Ian Harris (June 17, 1952–December 23, 2014) was a leading authority on Cambodian Buddhism, Buddhism and politics, and Buddhism and environmentalism. His work on Buddhism and politics led to two edited volumes, *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth-Century Asia* (1999) and *Buddhism, Power and Politics in Southeast Asia* (2007). In addition, his keen interest in Cambodian Buddhism led to a number of significant volumes including, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice* (2005) and *Buddhism in a Dark Age: Cambodian Monks under Pol Pot* (2013). Much of what we know about Cambodian Buddhism in the West can be attributed to Harris's research and writing. He was Professor Emeritus at the University of Cumbria and held visiting positions at Oxford University and the University of British Columbia, among others. During 2011–12, he was the Tun Lin Kok Yuen Distinguished Professor of Buddhist Studies at the University of Toronto and as of June 2013, he was visiting Professor of Buddhist Studies at Kings College, London.

He also founded, with Peter Harvey in 1996, the UK Association for Buddhist Studies.

Steven Heine is professor and director of Asian Studies at Florida International University. A specialist on the formation of Zen Buddhism in China and its spread to medieval Japan, Heine has published more than two dozen books. His recent works include monographs, *Zen Skin, Zen Marrow* (2009), *Like Cats and Dogs: Contesting the Mu Kōan in Zen Buddhism* (2013), and *Zen Koans* (2014), as well as edited volumes, *Dōgen: Textual and Historical Studies* (2012), and *Dōgen and Sōtō Zen* (2015).

Hsiao-Lan Hu received her PhD in Religion from Temple University and is currently an associate professor of Religious Studies & Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Detroit Mercy. Her monograph *This-Worldly Nibbāna: A Buddhist-Feminist Social Ethic for Peacemaking in the Global Community* (2011) is an interdisciplinary study that combines the philosophy and sociology of early Buddhism, engaged Buddhism, poststructuralist feminist theory, liberation theology, socioeconomic studies on globalization, and peace studies.

Paul O. Ingram is Professor Emeritus at Pacific Lutheran University, where he taught history of religions for thirty-four years. His publications include: *Wrestling with the Ox* (2006), *Wrestling with God* (2006), *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue in an Age of Science* (2007), *Passing Over and Returning: A Pluralist Theology of Religions* (2013), *The Process of Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* (2009), and *Living Without a Why: Mysticism, Pluralism, and the Way of Grace* (2014).

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Damien Keown is Emeritus Professor of Buddhist Ethics at Goldsmiths College, University of London. His main research interests are theoretical and applied aspects of Buddhist ethics, with particular reference to contemporary issues. He has published widely and his books have been translated into many languages. In 1994 he founded *The Journal of Buddhist Ethics* with Charles S. Prebish, with whom he also co-founded the Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism Series.

Poranee Natadecha-Sponsel holds the doctorate in education from Educational Foundations at the University of Hawai'i. Until her retirement in 2012 she taught at Chaminade University in philosophy and religion. There she was Executive Director of the Reverend Yoshi Fujitani Interfaith Program for peace and social justice. She served as President of the Hawai'i Association of International Buddhists, and is a member of the Honpa Hongwanji and Jodo Mission of Hawai'i.

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Christopher Queen lectures on Buddhism and World Religions at Harvard University. He co-edited and contributed to *Action Dharma: New Studies in Engaged Buddhism* (2003), *Engaged Buddhism in the West* (2000), *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship* (1999), and *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (1996). He is past dean of students for continuing education at Harvard, board president of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, and co-founder of the Dharma Chakra Mission and Academy, Bodhgaya, India.

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Teaching Buddhism

PART I

*Updating Perennial
Course Subjects*

Teaching Buddhism as Philosophy

Mark Siderits

Introduction

Many of us in the professoriate end up developing and teaching the courses we wish had been available when we were undergraduates. When I went to university, I already had some interest in Buddhism. I was, of course, massively uninformed on the subject. At 17, I had read little beyond D. T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, and Edward Conze. I did, though, have the vague sense that Buddhism was somehow more “philosophical” than other religions, that it relied less on faith and more on thought. It was this interest in Buddhism that drew me to the study of philosophy. But since the philosophy department of the school where I began did not have any courses in Asian philosophy, I started off studying Western philosophy, and of the most hard-core analytic variety. That training helped prepare me for what I would find when I was finally able to study the texts of Buddhist philosophers like Vasubandhu, Nāgārjuna, and Dharmakīrti. My path was long and bumpy, though, and so when I had the opportunity I began developing a course that I hoped might smooth the way for similarly positioned students—interested in Buddhism but without formal training in its history and thought, and also with little or no prior study of philosophy. I am not sure how much my earlier incarnation would have liked taking the course I developed, but I have greatly enjoyed teaching it for many years.

For most of my career I taught in an undergraduate-only philosophy program at a large Midwestern state university. Such programs tend to have relatively few majors, and general education was our department’s bread and butter. When I was first hired the university had just instituted a new general education scheme that included a one-course requirement in “non-Western

studies.” My department saw this as an opportunity to broaden its array of general education courses beyond the usual humanities and quantitative reasoning categories. I was assigned to teach a course called “Oriental Philosophy,” as well as several courses in Western philosophy.

My first struggle involved changing the name of the course. The struggle was not with my colleagues in the philosophy department, who were actually quite supportive of my efforts. The fight came when my proposal went to the committee overseeing the new general education program. What I proposed was not just that “Oriental” be dropped in favor of some less Eurocentric term, but that the course I was to teach be a survey not of Asian philosophy but of Buddhist philosophy. This, I was told, would make the course far too narrow and specialized to be included in general education. What they wanted was a course that surveyed all of “Asian thought,” including not only the Buddhist traditions of South and East Asia but also Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, neo-Confucianism, and perhaps Shinto as well. They wanted a course that covered all of the major Asian religions.

Of course I have no objection to such courses, which can serve a very valuable function. And even though I was not trained in religious studies, I imagine I might have been able to cobble together a semi-respectable survey of the major tenets of the major Asian religious traditions. The difficulty was that I did not see how a course like that could serve one important purpose behind the presence of philosophy in general education. Philosophers are prone to making somewhat startling pronouncements. But when they do, they are expected to give arguments in support of their claims. A major aim of undergraduate philosophy instruction is to help students develop some of the skills involved in argument construction and evaluation. The thinkers of the major Asian traditions make a wide variety of interesting pronouncements on any number of topics. When it is incumbent on the instructor to discuss all of those claims, there can be little time left for the systematic investigation of the arguments given in their support.

Indeed it could be argued that only through a detailed investigation of a single Asian philosophical tradition could one hope to meet a major goal behind a “non-Western studies” requirement in general education: countering Eurocentric cultural stereotypes. The myth of rational West/spiritual East still has some place in the popular imagination. According to that stereotype, the strength of Asian cultures stems from their rejection of scientific rationality in favor of more intuitive and holistic ways of grasping the world. This is, of course, a mischaracterization of premodern Asia, let alone of Asia today. One of the best ways of dispelling this notion is to look at the philosophers of a particular tradition in action, constructing arguments in support of their

view, entertaining objections from their opponents, formulating responses to these objections, in some cases modifying the original view in response to the opponent's objections, and so on. This is not the sort of thing one is likely to be able to do to any great extent when one is under pressure to move on to the next major thinker on the list.

In this regard, systematic study of the Buddhist philosophical tradition in particular may have an additional benefit. The myth of rational West/spiritual East reflects a deeper tendency to think that soteriological matters are necessarily extra-logical, that reason can at best play only a very limited role in spiritual matters. (Interest in Buddhism often grows out of this view when it is combined with the belief that Western cultures have overemphasized rationality.) There are, of course, elements of the Buddhist tradition that echo this thought. But Buddhist philosophers generally disagree. Even for those who hold that in the end the nature of reality cannot be fully grasped through conceptualization (and not all Buddhist philosophers hold this), there is still the conviction that the exercise of philosophical rationality is a necessary component of the path to liberation from suffering. The study of Buddhist philosophy can serve to raise questions about a form of reason–faith dichotomy that many of our students simply take for granted.



STUDENTS TAKE A course called “Buddhist Philosophy” out of a wide variety of motives and with a wide variety of beliefs and expectations. Some come in order to explore other religious traditions, others out of a broader interest in Asian cultures, still others because they want to know more about Buddhism specifically. For many students this will be their first philosophy class, but even those who have studied Western philosophy may bring misconceptions about what is likely to happen in a course on Buddhist philosophy. Students who are new to the study of philosophy often think of the discipline as a body of doctrines and expect to learn just what philosophers have established. They are often surprised to discover that there is no body of “philosophical facts” analogous to the “astronomical facts” one might learn in an introductory astronomy course. Skepticism can set in when they discover that after more than two millennia there is very little that all philosophers will agree on. This can be mitigated somewhat by pointing out that philosophers do generally agree on at least one major claim: that the simple answers to the questions philosophy examines are wrong, that the truth will turn out to be far more complicated than we are likely to imagine when we first come to the subject. But what students need to be made to understand is that the study of philosophy aims first and foremost not at mastery of a body of doctrine but at development of

a set of intellectual practices. Yes, they will study the doctrines and theories of philosophers like the Buddha, Vasubandhu, Nāgārjuna, and Dharmakīrti. But for any claim made by one of these philosophers, there will be important objections raised by other philosophers. Buddhist philosophers, just like philosophers in the West, seem to delight in contradicting one another. What students need to attend to, though, is how the debate is conducted: how a given theory is initially defended through the development of a supporting argument, what sorts of criticisms of the argument might be justifiable, how the proponent of the theory might try to answer seemingly legitimate objections to their argument either by modifying the argument or by showing that the objection is misplaced, and so on.

This is hard work for the students (and for the instructor as well). Some of the sting can be taken out if the student can come to see themselves as acquiring skills that will enable them to reach their own conclusions on the matters discussed by Buddhist philosophers. My experience has been that this requires considerable classroom discussion as well as a great deal of student writing. When, for instance, I cover the argument of certain Buddhist philosophers for the claim that all things are momentary, I begin with the claim itself, representing it as something I (being a mad philosopher) believe but I am quite sure they do not. We will then explore some of the implications of my outrageous claim, such as that at each instant the blackboard in the room goes out of existence, only to be replaced by a new blackboard just like it. I will then lay out the premises of the argument that is meant to prove this conclusion, discussing what each premise means and what reason there is to think it may be true. I then review the reasoning that is supposed to lead from the premises to the conclusion. The students are then invited to show where the argument has gone wrong, either in its reasoning or in giving as evidence a premise that is actually false. Students sometimes respond by saying that the argument must be bad since its conclusion (that all things are momentary) is obviously false. To this I will reply that while I agree that the conclusion sounds outrageous, still I have given reasons to believe that it is true and they have not yet shown me where those reasons go astray. When students do begin to present real objections, some of these reveal that the students have not fully understood the premises of the argument, and this gives an opportunity to clarify its details. As discussion proceeds the quality of the objections generally improves, though this is sometimes because I have given them hints about more effective strategies for criticizing the argument. Throughout the discussion I try to convey that while I sympathize with their plight, I am still fairly confident that the outrageous conclusion is true, and that I am putting it to the test by inviting criticism of the argument from reasonable opponents. Of

course, I express pleasure when students present truly challenging objections. But the discussion typically ends with the argument undefeated; objections that have not been decisively answered turn out to have hidden complicating factors that would require considerable effort before it could be shown that they could be made to work.

In order to reinforce the lessons of this discussion, I might ask students to write a short paper analyzing, reconstructing, and evaluating this argument. Students who are new to philosophy often find this quite difficult to do, even though I am asking them to do little more than re-create in writing a streamlined version of our classroom discussion. What one frequently hears is, "It all seemed so clear when we were discussing it, but when I tried to write about it I couldn't see where to begin." It is, of course, crucial that students understand the intended audience of their essay to be not the instructor but someone like a fellow student who missed class that week. This helps them appreciate the difference between merely listing premises and conclusion (something I generally do on the board) and explaining how the argument is supposed to work. The deeper challenge students often face on their first exposure to philosophy is taking on the perspective of someone who accepts a counterintuitive claim and thinks that the argument in question provides evidence for its truth. As students get better at this, they will often come to appreciate philosophy instruction despite the fact that it does not give them "the answers" they initially hoped for.



NONE OF THIS will be news to anyone who teaches undergraduate philosophy courses. These are the sorts of techniques we use to help students develop the kinds of reasoning skills that philosophy instruction is intended to inculcate. But given the realities of academia, there will likely be some demand for instruction in Buddhist philosophy from Buddhist studies specialists without much experience in the philosophy classroom. As will be evident from the above description of a sample lesson, teaching Buddhist philosophy can be quite different from teaching about Buddhism in the typical undergraduate religious studies course. One difference that is likely to stand out is the degree to which I represent myself as believing and defending many of the more outrageous claims made by Buddhist philosophers, such as that everything is momentary. Of course, I tell the students that this is a conscious strategy I am adopting in order to help them learn to evaluate arguments: we are more likely to look for flaws if the seemingly unacceptable conclusion is supported by reasons that appear persuasive. That this is a pedagogically motivated stance is also made clear by the fact that I will defend conflicting views at different times over the course of the semester. Buddhist philosophers have disagreed among

themselves about important points, such as whether existents are momentary or just impermanent, whether physical objects exist, and whether there really are causal connections between events. And no one can consistently believe both that some things exist for more than a moment, and that nothing does. So it will be evident to students that I do not necessarily believe everything I say and even argue for. But it is important to philosophy instruction that the views being examined be seen as more than mere historical artifacts. It needs to be made evident that a reasonable person might hold views quite at odds with common sense. The aim of the course cannot be represented as merely one of describing the various views that Buddhists have held during the long history of Buddhist thought. It must be seen as trying to determine if any of those views might be true.

This helps account for the importance for philosophers of the principle called “charity of interpretation.” Here charity means giving a text the benefit of the doubt: where a text allows of two interpretations, the principle counsels that we choose the one that yields a stronger argument, one with better credentials for helping us attain the truth. For instance, Buddhist philosophers sometimes argue that there is no self on the grounds that a self would have to be a controller of the psychophysical elements making up the person (their CEO, as it were), and each of these can be controlled. This argument clearly relies on the assumption that there is no more to the person than the psychophysical elements, and on one interpretation, the evidence presented in the argument contradicts the conclusion: since all the psychophysical elements can be controlled, there must be more to the person than just these elements. But another interpretation avoids this logical fault: it takes control to be something performed by a shifting coalition of elements, so that one need not assume there is more to the person than just the elements in order to explain the phenomena. In the absence of textual evidence against the second interpretation, it is to be preferred.

To the philologist-historian (a common type in Buddhist studies) this move will appear highly suspect. It seems to them to attribute intentions to the author of the argument that we could never be in a position to verify, and thus flies in the face of the principles of sound scholarship. The philosopher will reply that we may be unable to discern the precise intentions of the author, but this is beside the point. We can generally tell when a text is philosophical: it gives arguments for its more controversial claims, it considers the objections likely to be raised by an opponent, and it avoids mere appeal to authority. When an argument occurs in a text of this nature, it is reasonable to take it as playing a role in the shared enterprise of seeking the truth through philosophical inquiry. And in this enterprise we find that we make more progress when we interpret the

arguments of our interlocutors charitably. Suppose I reject the view for which you have given an argument, and your formulation of the argument is open to stronger and weaker interpretations. I will be better able to test the strength of my own position if I take your argument more charitably, even if your intention was indeterminate when you gave the argument. The aim of the philosopher is not to read the minds of the authors of the texts they study. It is to make progress toward finding the best answers to the questions philosophy asks.

For some this may raise concerns about partisanship. If one must always give Buddhist philosophers the benefit of the doubt in interpreting their arguments, will this not lead in the end to the appearance of proselytizing? I agree that this is a valid concern. Unless one is teaching in a Buddhist institution, the administration is unlikely to look favorably on an instructor who seems intent on persuading their students to commit to a Buddhist path. More important, students will resent anything they perceive as illegitimate pressure on a matter they think of as personal. And most important, advocacy interferes with a paramount goal of undergraduate philosophy instruction, teaching students to think critically and analytically about complex matters. This is why it is important to convey to students the pedagogical point behind judicious application of the principle of charity of interpretation. When one tells them repeatedly that one is taking the side of the Buddhist philosophers just in order to challenge them to think more carefully about the issue at hand, this may deflect their suspicions and get them back on task.

In my experience, the question always comes up whether I am a Buddhist. This is a complicated question, and answering it can be a delicate and tricky matter. At one time I was inclined to avoid giving a direct answer, while at the same time trying to reinforce the point that my taking the stance of a Buddhist philosopher in the classroom was a teaching strategy. (The few philosophy majors in the course knew I could make Plato sound equally plausible when I taught ancient philosophy.) In recent years, however, I have taken to answering that while I admire Buddhist philosophy, I do not consider myself a Buddhist practitioner. This has the advantages of being a direct answer to a question I think is legitimate, and being true. What the best answer is for the instructor who is a practitioner I cannot say. What I can say is that I think students need to be reassured that the information they are receiving about Buddhism is not biased (whether for or against) by commitments of their instructor. Lack of clarity on this can get in the way of effective philosophy instruction.

Students will have many questions about Buddhism that may not be especially relevant to the study of Buddhist philosophy. They will want to know about karma and rebirth. They will ask what “the” Buddhist stance is on moral controversies like abortion and same-sex marriage. They will want to know

how to meditate and what meditation is for. They will ask how many buddhas there really are, and where they are supposed to reside. Those instructors whose training was principally in Buddhist studies will be tempted to answer such questions, but doing so to any great extent can prove a distraction in a course that is to be devoted to Buddhist philosophy. Concerning meditation, for instance, I have generally confined myself to the standard story according to which it is a technique for learning to confirm through careful observation of one's own mental processes the absence of an owner and controller self, an absence that one first came to apprehend through philosophical analysis. I am careful to add that since we are in an academic institution, not a monastic institution, we will not be learning how to meditate.

The question of karma and rebirth is a good example of a Buddhist doctrine that is difficult to justify on rational grounds, and for this reason might be worth some discussion. Of course, one finds purported proofs of karma and rebirth in the Buddhist philosophical literature, but these generally amount to little more than an appeal to the special cognitive powers supposedly developed through advanced yogic techniques. What philosophy can do is show that karma and rebirth are compatible with non-self, but that is another matter. And while students find the idea of karma and rebirth intriguing, few find it truly believable, particularly when it turns out to require that the series of lives one has lived be literally beginningless. So a discussion of this doctrine represents a good opportunity for the instructor who wants to show that they are engaging in academic inquiry, not advocacy.

The doctrine does, after all, have its unsavory side. It can be, and has been used to justify all sorts of problematic attitudes and practices, and has played an important ideological role in preserving systems of oppression. It may be worthwhile to bring this out, and then raise the question whether there could be a recognizable form of Buddhism that did not contain this doctrine. One might use this question to get students to think about what they take Buddhism's core teachings to be. This may in turn lead to a distinction between Buddhist philosophy and those Buddhist practices that grow out of the vicissitudes of institutionalization. (The idea of transfer of karmic merit, for instance, turns out to be quite useful when it comes to raising material support for large monastic institutions.) One can do all this without necessarily conveying a blanket rejection of Buddhism. There are, after all, many East Asian Buddhists today who say that karma and rebirth were a bad idea that can and should be stripped from Buddhism's valuable essence. The point of such a discussion is just to develop a more nuanced understanding of a complex tradition and help clarify the place of Buddhist philosophy within that tradition.

I have one last word of advice for those whose training was principally in Buddhist studies and not philosophy. The obstacles one is likely to encounter in a course in Buddhist philosophy are ones that every teacher of undergraduate philosophy courses has confronted. There is a wealth of experience to be found among your colleagues in the philosophy department. Regrettably, it is unlikely that any of them will know much about Buddhist philosophy. Indeed some may be skeptical that there is such a thing. But all will know what it is like to teach an argument for a counterintuitive conclusion. If you go to them for help on how to approach a particular argument, they are likely to have useful advice. Indeed since the argument may well be new to them (many Buddhist philosophical arguments use strategies that are unlike their Western equivalents), they may become intrigued and want to know more. So in consulting them you might bestow a benefit. Philosophers love puzzles, and the Buddhist philosophical tradition contains a wealth of intellectual puzzles unfamiliar to those trained in the Western tradition.



WHEN I WROTE *Buddhism as Philosophy*, my aim was to make it possible for philosophers with an interest in Buddhism but no formal training in Buddhist studies to develop and teach an undergraduate course in Buddhist philosophy. For those in that position, little I have said so far will come as a surprise. But there are difficulties attendant on any new project, and even someone who knows the discipline of philosophy well will confront their share of obstacles. There is, for instance, the temptation to be overly scrupulous in attending to the historical details of the Buddhist philosophical tradition. Here is one example where doing so might raise pedagogical difficulties.

Even though the dating of classical Indian philosophers is never an exact science, it is clear that Nāgārjuna lived several centuries before Vasubandhu and Asaṅga, and that consequently the Madhyamaka school developed before the Yogācāra school of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy. This would suggest that one ought to teach Madhyamaka before Yogācāra. The difficulty is that once students understand the force of the Madhyamaka arguments for emptiness, they find it difficult to take seriously the subjective idealism of Yogācāra. If Nāgārjuna really has a successful defense of metaphysical quietism, then the metaphysical thesis that there is only consciousness loses considerable plausibility. And this may be an unfortunate outcome, since understanding the Yogācāra arguments for consciousness-only can be quite useful. Of course, students are unlikely to come to believe that the physical world does not exist. But once they recognize how difficult it turns out to be to defend the existence of the external world against idealist critics like Yogācāra, they

begin to better appreciate the difficulties the philosopher confronts. This is why I have regularly ignored the historical record and taught Yogācāra before Madhyamaka. One can do this without hiding from students the fact that the history is probably more complicated.

This is an instance of the larger question of “rational reconstruction” versus “historical fidelity” that tends to divide philosophers and philologists in Buddhist studies. Those scholars who are of a philological bent insist we cannot go beyond anything attested to by the text and its historical setting. Those more interested in philosophy will regularly transgress these boundaries in the name of finding a truth that the texts can be viewed as aiming at. For another example, the metaphysical theories of the Abhidharma schools make use of the idea that physical objects are composed of atoms of four types: earth, water, air, and fire. In discussing this one must, of course, explain that by “atom” they mean philosophers’ atoms, and not what are (misleadingly) called atoms today: things that are genuinely impartite (whatever those may turn out to be like), not things composed of protons, electrons, and neutrons. The real difficulty comes with what a philosopher will want to do with the doctrine of the four elements. We know now that earth, water, air, and fire are not the four basic kinds of substance out of which everything physical is composed. Perhaps today we might say instead that the six types of quark (up, down, strange, charm, bottom, and top) are the basic kinds of material substances out of which all physical objects are composed. The best science available to classical Indian philosophers (as well as to the philosophers of ancient Greece and China) had it that there are four basic substances; our own science might say six. To the philosopher this is a difference that does not make a difference. We are quite content to leave it to the physicists to determine the number and nature of the basic building blocks of the physical world, since nothing of philosophical importance turns on this. So we are content to describe the Abhidharma doctrine as one that concerns whatever the basic particles turn out to be. And where the doctrine figures in an argument, we are happy to let a suitably updated version stand in for the older claim of the four elements. The philologist-historian will accuse the philosopher of falsifying the record by reading our own views into the texts. But the philosopher will not be impressed. We have been doing just this sort of thing with Plato and Aristotle for quite some time, and nothing bad seems to have come of it.

Sometimes, though, the philologist-historian is justified in their criticism. For philosophers have been known to read into the Buddhist tradition theories and arguments familiar from Western philosophy but not actually to be found in Buddhist philosophy. For instance, while many Buddhist philosophers (as well as most other classical Indian philosophers) adhered to the direct realist view of

sense perception, one Buddhist school developed a representationalist theory. This controversy is familiar to students of Western philosophy from a similar episode in early modern philosophy, so it is tempting to see a similar motivation at work. Students often have difficulty grasping what representationalists are claiming,¹ and in that situation one might be inclined to invoke Cartesian reasons in order to help the student. Skeptical scenarios are an effective way of conveying the point that veridical and non-veridical sensory cognitions might be indistinguishable from the inside.² But additional premises are needed to get from here to the representationalist theory itself, and one key premise is the thesis that knowledge requires knowing that one knows.³ That thesis is plausibly attributed to Descartes, but not to the Buddhist philosophers who defended representationalism. Instead they used the time-lag argument, as well as an argument to the effect that neither the macro-physical object nor its constituent atoms could be the object of perception. So it would likely be a mistake to use skeptical scenarios to motivate the Buddhist formulation of representationalism.

This sort of problem arises not only in the classroom but in the scholarly literature as well. Early in the twentieth century, the Russian Buddhologist F. Th. Stcherbatsky (1866–1942) did pioneering work on the school of Buddhist philosophy that first developed a distinctive theory of knowledge. His name for that school, “Buddhist Logic,” reveals the Kantian flavor of his conception of philosophy. This name is now considered problematic, since “logic” is currently taken to mean the formal study of the consequence relation, and not the classification of reliable cognitive instruments that Dignāga and his followers were attempting. The deeper problem is that he saw elements of Kant’s critical philosophy in the work of these Buddhist philosophers, and this was most likely an error. That an eminent philologically trained Buddhologist like Stcherbatsky could make this mistake is evidence that we must be on our guard when we think we see parallels between the two traditions. What it does not show, however, is that those who were first trained in Western philosophy will always go astray when they bring their expertise to bear on Buddhist texts.

The scholarly literature on Buddhist philosophy, while still small, is growing. And there are now controversies concerning how to interpret the theories of individual philosophers and schools. In this situation the philosopher who is a newcomer to the Buddhist tradition may have trouble sorting it all out. This leads to the pressing problem of choosing appropriate readings for an undergraduate course in Buddhist philosophy: if the experts do not agree on how to interpret the tradition, and students cannot be asked to read all the experts and make up their minds for themselves, which interpretation do I choose? A similar problem arises for those philosophers who are not historians of philosophy but must teach the history of Western philosophy. Scholars

of ancient philosophy are divided over the interpretation of Plato and Aristotle, scholars of early modern philosophy are divided over the interpretation of Leibniz and Hume, so what should we ask our students to read? One solution is to have students read the original texts themselves and avoid as much as possible the debates raging in the secondary literature. This is no easy task, but it can be done. (Jonathan Bennett has been an enormous help in early modern.)

Unfortunately, this solution is not really viable in Buddhist philosophy. The texts are simply too terse to be comprehensible to the average undergraduate. This is the reason behind the proliferation of square brackets one finds in translations of Buddhist philosophical texts. Here is a translation of a verse of Nāgārjuna's text, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*:

If it were that "That is just myself," [then appropriation would not be distinct from the appropriator "I"]; however appropriation is distinct.

How, on the other hand, can your self be utterly distinct from appropriation?

Siderits and Katsura 2013: 320

The argument concerns the relation between the person and the act of "appropriation" or identification with past and future psychophysical elements in the causal series that constitutes the person. The material in square brackets is not in the text, it is supplied by the translator. This addition is not gratuitous; it is based on what is found in the Indian commentaries on the text, and without it the central argument cannot be discerned. But students find the device of square brackets like this quite distracting. Moreover, even with this material supplied, the argument is still quite opaque. For one thing there is the technical term "appropriation," which is familiar to Buddhist philosophers but requires explanation for the rest of us. And then there is the fact that the text will constantly shift back and forth from the opponent's voice to that of the proponent, often without any clear signal of the switch.

These are the facts that led me to adopt the approach found in *Buddhism as Philosophy*, where I included translations of substantial hunks of philosophical texts, but embedded them in explanations of the arguments they contain. I have always hoped that my students would learn to read the texts of the great philosophers for themselves, without reliance on the secondary literature. But for Buddhist texts (as for Kant) this may be beyond the reach of many undergraduates.



ONE LAST PIECE of advice is that in trying to develop a sense of what the Buddhist philosophers were up to and how they argue, one should not confine one's attention to Buddhist philosophical texts. Buddhist philosophy arose in

India in constant interaction with philosophers defending the views of the “orthodox” (Brahmanical) schools, especially Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, and Sāṃkhya. We gain a much clearer perspective on the Buddhist theories and arguments when we can place them in the context of this centuries-long conversation. Fortunately, there is now a significant body of literature making these elements of the Indian philosophical tradition accessible to nonspecialist philosophers. Especially noteworthy for their clarity and philosophical rigor are the writings of J. N. Mohanty and B. K. Matilal, and more recently of Arindam Chakrabarti and Jonardon Ganeri.



Conclusion

I have always enjoyed teaching Buddhist philosophy. I also think students can benefit from such a course when it is taught with the right combination of engagement and rigor. (I have not always found the right balance of these two elements.) Institutional realities make it unlikely that in the foreseeable future there will be many young scholars who have been formally trained to teach Buddhist philosophy as philosophy. Yet the demand from students is clearly there. If that demand is to be filled, there will have to be some retooling of staff who start out lacking some of the requisite training. I think this can be done successfully. I have tried to indicate some of the elements that I think are important to the transition. The reader interested in more details on how such a course should be organized can consult *Buddhism as Philosophy*, which I wrote with this audience in mind. I hope that anyone who chooses to teach this kind of course will find it as rewarding and fun as I have.

Notes

1. A representationalist theory of perception claims that what one is directly aware of in sensory experience is not the physical object with which the sense organ is in contact but rather an inner mental representation that is produced by stimulation of the sense organ. As applied to the case of visual experience, for instance, the claim would be that what one actually “sees” is not the color and shape of the external object but rather an image on a kind of inner mental video monitor.
2. The argument from illusion is a kind of skeptical argument that has been a popular way to motivate representationalism ever since Descartes. The basic idea is that since it is impossible to tell just from the experience alone whether, for instance, the water one seems to see is real or just a mirage, what one is directly aware of in both cases must be of the same sort. But what one is directly aware of in the non-veridical case—the mirage—is manifestly not an external object, so it

must be an inner mental content. Hence, this must be true in the veridical case as well.

3. It is only if we assume that in order to know that I see water I must be able to exclude all possible sources of doubt (such as that I am hallucinating or that I am a brain in a vat) that the occurrence of perceptual illusions can be used to support the conclusion that the direct object of cognition must be the same in both the veridical and non-veridical cases.

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Teaching Nāgārjuna

Roger R. Jackson

Introduction

The concept of emptiness (Sanskrit, hereafter abbreviated Skt. *śūnyatā*), also sometimes translated as “voidness,” “no-thing-ness,” or “openness,” is among the most puzzling and productive ideas ever proposed by a philosopher. It is one of the key terms of the Great Vehicle (Mahāyāna) Buddhist traditions that have dominated significant portions of Asia for over two millennia, and it has fascinated Western scholars and philosophers for the past two centuries. Wherever it is invoked, its unapologetic rhetoric of negation—with its denial that any entity or concept of any sort is either self-existent or intrinsically real (*svabhāva*)—poses a challenge to commonplace conceptions of what the world is, who we are, and how we ought to think and live.¹ The figure universally credited with first promulgating emptiness in a philosophically rigorous manner is the Indian master Nāgārjuna, who probably flourished in the second or third century C.E., so any attempt to understand emptiness must take him into account.² This chapter will touch very briefly on historical questions surrounding Nāgārjuna, then will focus in greater detail on the textual resources and pedagogical strategies available to anyone who wishes to study or teach his thought in a college or university setting.



Historical Issues

Although Nāgārjuna was a second- or third-century C.E. Indian, and the Buddhist tradition that claims him, the Mahāyāna (Great Vehicle), originated

in India one or two centuries before his time, the Mahāyāna, like most forms of Buddhism, faded from the Indian scene after around 1200. It survived and thrived, however, in such places as Nepal, Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and Mongolia, which were generally hospitable to Buddhism, and in many cases adopted it. Nāgārjuna was well known in India—where he had both admirers and detractors—but it was in these east and inner Asian Buddhist cultures that he reached his apotheosis as one of the greatest of all Buddhist masters. The originators of the Chinese *Sanlun* (“Three Treatise”) school composed his biography and both translated and analyzed his works not many centuries after his death; East Asian masters in the tradition best known as Zen consider him an early patriarch in their lineage; Pure Land Buddhists list him as an important precursor; and Tibetan Buddhists revere him as the human source of their profoundest wisdom traditions—and of many tantric practices, besides. Unsurprisingly, then, when we attempt to make sense of Nāgārjuna as a historical figure and author, we are faced with a welter of oft-conflicting testimony from a multitude of sources that still leave us uncertain on many key points.

For one thing, most of the biographical information we have about Nāgārjuna comes in the form of later legends of Chinese or Tibetan (but rarely Indian) origin, to the effect, for instance, that he was south Indian Brahmin-turned-Buddhist, a scholar at the Nālandā monastic university, the main promulgator of the Perfection of Wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) sutras, and an advisor to a king of the Śātavāhana dynasty of south-central India. The accuracy of these stories (not to mention considerably more fanciful ones) cannot be easily verified, so there is little we can say about Nāgārjuna’s life with much confidence.³ Furthermore, Mahāyāna Buddhist literature is replete with texts purported to be by Nāgārjuna. With a few important exceptions, none of them survive in Sanskrit. But the Chinese Taishō Tripiṭaka catalogue lists twenty-four works by Nāgārjuna, while the various editions of the Tibetan canon credit him with well over a hundred. The rather expansive Tibetan listing includes not just the early centuries c.e. philosophical and devotional works recognized by Indian commentators and Chinese translators but also alchemical, medical, and tantric material that must have appeared well after 600 c.e. Thus, over the course of the first millennium c.e., there may have been two, three, four, or more Nāgārjunas—though Tibetan tradition, for its part, often assumes that all the texts under his name were by written the same person, who lived six hundred years!⁴

Whatever the details of his life or the scope of his writings, it is Nāgārjuna the philosopher of emptiness that is most renowned in the Buddhist world and beyond, and in the following two sections, I will ignore the later alchemical,

medical, and tantric works and concentrate on the “early” Nāgārjuna’s philosophical and devotional texts. In the next section, I will focus on Nāgārjuna’s written corpus of philosophical and devotional works and the most useful English-language sources for gaining access to it. Then, I will present some pedagogical strategies that might help make Nāgārjuna’s ideas comprehensible to contemporary college and university students.



Nāgārjuna’s Writings

The decision to focus mostly on Nāgārjuna’s “early” writings does not free us from the historical and textual problems outlined above. Tibetan tradition divides Nāgārjuna’s non-tantric corpus into three collections that cover most, if not all, of his sutra-based works: (1) the Collection on Reasoning; (2) the Collection of Praises; and (3) the Collection of Advice.⁵ Although Tibetan scholars accept the validity of all of the dozens of texts in these collections, modern scholars are divided on which of these works may be assigned with confidence to Nāgārjuna. Indeed, there is universal agreement on *only one* text: the *Madhyamakakārikā*. The textual and historical arguments that scholars employ to delimit Nāgārjuna’s corpus need not detain us here, nor need we decide which version of the corpus makes the most sense.⁶ Instead, I will briefly outline the contents of a number of Nāgārjuna’s major works, in each case pointing to the English-language sources that allow us the easiest access to them.

The Madhyamakakārikā

The *Madhyamakakārikā* (Stanzas on the Middle Way) is unquestionably Nāgārjuna’s *best-known* and most influential text, and is arguably the most important work ever written by a Buddhist philosopher. Since the moment it appeared, it has been ceaselessly discussed in India, East Asia, and Inner Asia, and has lent its name—Madhyamaka, the Middle Way—to one of the two philosophical schools that dominated the Mahāyāna world; the other, the Yogācāra, arose in part as a more constructive, psychologically oriented alternative to the Madhyamaka’s rhetoric of ontological negation. The *Madhyamakakārikā*, which is extant in Sanskrit, consists of 447 verses divided into twenty-seven chapters. Each of these chapters covers a key philosophical concept that was current in Buddhist (and some non-Buddhist) schools of Nāgārjuna’s era. These include causation, motion, desire, action, suffering, bondage and freedom, essence, self, time, creation and destruction, error, rebirth, the Buddha, and *nirvāṇa*.

With two important exceptions, Nāgārjuna thoroughly deconstructs every concept in his purview. He uses a variety of argumentative tactics to expose the logical flaws in his opponents' attempts to establish their concepts and leaves no entity or idea able to stand on its own. Ultimately, each lacks self-existence (*svabhāva*), hence each is empty (*shūnya*). The first chapter, on causation, which employs a "tetralemma," provides a classic example: an entity cannot be said to originate from itself (if it did, cause and effect would be indistinguishable), from something other than itself (if it did, no connection could be established between cause and effect), from both itself and something other (one cannot have it both ways), and from neither itself nor something other (this entails chaos). Thus, causation is an empty concept. The second chapter, on motion, uses a different approach, arguing that the concept of motion cannot be established because each of the terms involved in discourse about it (goer, going, the gone-over) is relative to the others, hence cannot stand on its own, hence is empty. In like manner, Nāgārjuna works his way through a multitude of concepts, negating each in turn, until the reader is left with the distinct impression that the *Madhyamakakārikā* is simply a perverse exercise in nihilism. Certainly, some thinkers in Nāgārjuna's and later eras, both non-Buddhist and Buddhist, interpreted it this way.

Evidence to the contrary is found in the *Madhyamakakārikā* itself, in the two chapters that are not relentlessly deconstructive: chapter 24, on the Four Noble Truths, and chapter 26, on the twelve links of dependent arising. Chapter 24 begins with a preamble in which Nāgārjuna's opponent remarks that if the Madhyamaka analysis is correct, then the religious foundations of Buddhism are undermined, and there will be no Four Noble Truths, no spiritual attainments, and no Buddha, Dharma, or Sangha. Nāgārjuna replies (24:8–9) that his opponent has misunderstood the meaning of emptiness—and to do so is lethal, like wrongly handling a snake. In fact, the Buddhas teach by recourse to two truths, the ultimate (i.e., emptiness) and the superficial (i.e., worldly conventions), each of which is necessary, for without the conventional, the ultimate cannot be approached, and without the ultimate, *nirvāṇa* cannot be attained. In a series of brilliant reversals, Nāgārjuna goes on to argue that it is not his ideas but the opponent's that fail to make sense of the world, since if things are as the opponent claims them to be, self-existent (*svabhāva*), then they are permanent, partless, and independent, hence unrelated to the obviously changing reality of which we are part. On the other hand, if things are empty (i.e., impermanent, complex, and dependent), the world as it is can be easily explained. In one of the most famous verses in Buddhist literature (24:18), Nāgārjuna declares, "whatever is dependently arisen is emptiness," and "emptiness" itself is merely a designation for the

process of dependent arising; their mutuality is the middle way between the extremes of essentialism and nihilism. Thus, it turns out that Nāgārjuna's rhetoric of negation is precisely what is needed to assure that the Four Noble Truths, spiritual attainments, and the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are possible and meaningful.

Chapter 26 is simply a straightforward exposition of the twelve links of dependent arising through which the Buddha explained how we keep suffering rebirth through a chain of causes and conditions, of which the most important are ignorance, craving, and grasping. The elimination of those passions, in turn, leads to an undoing of suffering and rebirth, hence the attainment of *nirvāṇa*. The fact that Nāgārjuna does not deconstruct the twelve links shows that, for all his negative rhetoric, the entire purpose of his analysis is to help us undo the process of dependent arising and attain the state of peace and freedom that is *nirvāṇa*. While in chapter 25 Nāgārjuna does analyze the idea of *nirvāṇa*, showing its ultimate non-difference from *saṃsāra*, it is quite clear that, conventionally, the two are distinct, and, as unawakened beings, we should, in fact be intent on transcending *saṃsāra* and attaining *nirvāṇa*, the real, which is "independent, serene, untroubled by elaborations, non-conceptual, and single" (18:9). The surest way to do this, he insists, is simply to see the concepts we grasp for what they are—empty—then relinquish them. Relinquishing them, we eliminate passions and action, and attain liberation, *nirvāṇa*.

The *Madhyamakakārikā* has been translated into English in its entirety more than a dozen times.⁷ It is the one text indispensable for studying Nāgārjuna, but it is long and difficult. Those without the time or ambition to tackle the whole text in translation will find useful summaries in a number of works.⁸ By the same token, well-chosen excerpts may be found in a number of anthologies of Asian, Indian, or Buddhist philosophy.⁹ Also of value in approaching the *Madhyamakakārikā* are short books by two contemporary Tibetan teachers: the 14th Dalai Lama, who focuses on chapters 15 (on self-existence), 18 (on self), and 24 (on the Four Noble Truths), and Khenpo Tsültrim Gyamtso, who discusses a few verses from each chapter.¹⁰

Other Works: *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, *Shūnyatāsaptatī*, *Yuktiśaṣṭikā*, and *Ratnāvalī*

Although the *Madhyamakakārikā* is Nāgārjuna's masterpiece—hence our careful attention to it—many of the views expressed in it are reformulated or fleshed out in other works from his *Collection on Reasoning*, and if one wishes to read an entire work by Nāgārjuna that is representative of his

philosophy but of manageable length, four of these are of particular value: the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, *Shūnyatāsaptatī*, *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā*, and *Ratnāvalī*.¹¹

The *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (Turning aside objections) is extant in Sanskrit. It is accepted by most, but not all, scholars as a genuine work of Nāgārjuna, and often is regarded as a companion volume to the *Madhyamakakārikā*, since its seventy verses (and Nāgārjuna's own commentary upon them) are framed as a defense against critics of the teaching of emptiness and the philosophical methodology used to establish it. Of particular note are (1) its critique of the epistemic "sources of authority" (*pramāṇa*) used to establish Indian philosophies (e.g., perception, inference, and testimony), on the grounds that any attempt to establish a source of authority requires a further source of authority, and so forth, in infinite regress (verses 30–51); (2) its claim that the Madhyamaka analysis cannot be subject to refutation because, unlike a typical philosophical assertion, it involves no thesis but, instead, simply shows the absurd consequences (*prasaṅga*) of the assertions made by others (e.g., 29, 59); and (3) its concluding, religiously significant statement to the effect for the person who realizes emptiness, anything is possible, while for the person who does not, nothing is possible (70). The *Vigrahavyāvartanī* has been translated into English numerous times,¹² and may be profitably used as an introduction to Nāgārjuna's thought, though it would have to be set against the background of the *Madhyamakakārikā*.¹³

The *Shūnyatāsaptatī* (Seventy [stanzas] on emptiness), which actually contains seventy-three verses, is extant only in Tibetan translation. It is in some respects a highly condensed version of the *Madhyamakakārikā*, though it does take up topics not covered in the latter. It establishes the emptiness of numerous concepts, including causation; the twelve links of dependent arising; arising, abiding, and ceasing; the three times (past, present, future); actor, action, and result; forms and the visual faculty; consciousness; desire, hatred, and ignorance; and *nirvāṇa*. In short, "everything expressible is empty of self-existence" (verse 2). The style of argument used in the *Shūnyatāsaptatī* is like that of the *Madhyamakakārikā*, applying the logic of dilemmas and infinite regresses but with a special fondness for "emptying" concepts by showing their conceptual dependence upon other, related terms. For instance, since each of the terms of the twelve links of dependent arising exists in a contingent relationship to other terms in the series, none of them can truly exist. Just as in the *Madhyamakakārikā*, however, Nāgārjuna is careful to point out that the Buddha taught two truths, and that while ultimately no concepts can stand up to rigorous analysis, conventionally they are valid ways of describing dependently arisen phenomena. Thus, Nāgārjuna concludes, "Persons of faith who strive to seek

reality, and properly draw reasonable conclusions relying on a baseless Dharma will spurn becoming and non-becoming, and so attain peace. When they know that ‘this arises from that,’ the net of inferior views is reversed and, because desire, delusion, and anger have been spurned, they will attain unsullied *nirvāṇa*” (72–73). Though not discussed as frequently as the *Madhyamakakārikā* and *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, the *Shūnyatāsaptatī* is widely quoted in Indian Madhyamaka literature and has been translated numerous times into English.¹⁴

The *Yuktiśaṣṭikā* (Sixty [stanzas] on reasoning) is preserved in full in Chinese and Tibetan; twelve of its verses have been preserved in Sanskrit in Indian commentaries. While it contains a number of verses that argue concisely for the ultimate nonexistence of various entities and concepts—being and nonbeing, *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, origination and destruction, initial limit and final limit—its emphasis for the most part is on the spiritual importance of transcending dogmatic viewpoints, seeing through worldly appearances, eliminating our passions, and attaining *nirvāṇa*. In this sense, it provides a psychological analysis of our predicament and propounds a solution in the form of attaining proper understanding of the ultimate truth. Nāgārjuna mocks those who, failing to understand the import of dependent arising, believe that even the subtlest entity truly exists. Not grasping the illusion-like nature of things, the foolish impute reality where there is none, generate such defilements as desire and anger, and perform unskillful actions, which lead to suffering results. On the other hand, those who understand the equivalence of emptiness and dependent arising see through appearances, transcend dogmatic views, subdue their passions, and cross the ocean of existence to the truth that cancels all worldly conventions: *nirvāṇa*. The *Yuktiśaṣṭikā* has been translated into English several times.¹⁵ The *Yuktiśaṣṭikā* is useful for getting a sense of how Nāgārjuna fits into a larger Buddhist religious and psychological perspective, but its lack of detailed argumentation makes it less than ideal as a stand-alone introduction to his thought. It could, on the other hand, work well if used in concert with the *Shūnyatāsaptatī*, to which it is, in certain respects, a natural complement.

The *Ratnāvalī* (Jewel garland), which is partly extant in Sanskrit and found *in toto* in Tibetan translation, is framed as an epistle to a king. It consists of five hundred verses, divided into five chapters of equal length, treating, respectively, (1) higher rebirths and liberation, (2) basic ethical precepts, (3) the collections of merit and gnosis, (4) royal policy, and (5) the bodhisattva path. As will be evident from these chapter themes, the *Ratnāvalī* is much broader in conception than other texts in the Collection on Reasoning. It is the only work in Nāgārjuna’s corpus that sets his philosophy of emptiness

in detail within a larger Mahāyāna Buddhist framework; indeed, it also contains a defense of the Mahāyāna against its Buddhist critics. It is only in the *Ratnāvalī* that we see Nāgārjuna discuss such topics as the realms of Buddhist cosmology, the functioning of karma in an individual's life and lives, proper and improper behavior for laypeople and monastics,¹⁶ the accumulation of compassion and wisdom so as to attain the physical and Dharma bodies of a fully awakened buddha, and the stages traversed by a bodhisattva en route to buddhahood. In a sense, then, the *Ratnāvalī* fills out the details of the conventional truth that Nāgārjuna merely alludes to in his more philosophical works. At the same time, it is not lacking in philosophical argumentation. Three-quarters of chapter 1 (and nearly a quarter of chapters 2 and 3) is given over to a detailed demonstration of the emptiness, non-duality, and illusoriness of, for instance, the cosmos, the five constituents of a "person," causation, time, the six elements that make up the world, and *nirvāṇa*. By transcending the views of "is" and "is not" with regard to these, says Nāgārjuna, one tastes "the ambrosia of the profound teaching of the buddhas" (verse 62). The *Ratnāvalī* has been translated into English several times.¹⁷ It can be used as a stand-alone introduction to Nāgārjuna's thought, especially in those settings where it is important to place his philosophical perspective within the context of the Mahāyāna ethico-religious world in which he lived.

The panegyrics found in the Collection of Praises are not often taken as "typical" of Nāgārjuna, because their familiar negative rhetoric is tempered—and sometimes even overshadowed—by expressions of devotion and occasional indications of a more positive view of the Buddha and the nature of ultimate reality.

The four songs that usually constitute the *Catuḥstava*—the *Lokātīstava* (Praise of the world-transcending), *Niraupamyastava* (Praise of the incomparable), *Acintyastava* (Praise of the inconceivable), and *Paramārthastava* (Praise of the ultimate)—are all available in Sanskrit and are accepted as being genuine by the majority of scholars. The balance of negative and positive rhetoric varies from one to the other. The *Lokātīstava* (twenty-eight stanzas), for instance, is primarily a eulogy of the Buddha for his realization of the emptiness of all things—in spite of which he has willingly suffered for the sake of suffering beings (verses 1–2). Most of the poem consists of concise arguments for emptiness of the sort already familiar to readers of the Collection on Reasoning. The *Niraupamyastava* (twenty-five stanzas) briefly recaps arguments for emptiness and praises the Buddha for seeing it, but is more concerned for articulating the positive qualities of the Buddha, noting that, although he sees no form, his own form is

resplendent (16), and that in himself he is immaculate, and his Dharma Body eternal, inalterable, and non-conceptual, yet “in this world buddha-deeds effortlessly are performed” (24). The *Acintyastava* (fifty-nine verses) also moves from negative to positive rhetoric, praising the Buddha for his transcendence of all dualities (37–39), and arriving eventually at an assertion of the ultimate identity of emptiness, buddha, dependent arising, and every being and thing there is (40–43). The *Paramārthastava* (eleven verses) is a brief but effective celebration of the paradox that is the Buddha: indescribable, nonexistent, non-dual, colorless, measureless, unlocated, and profound beyond reckoning, he nonetheless is worthy of praise. Yet, asks Nāgārjuna, given emptiness, who really is there to praise, and who does the praising (9)? All the songs in the *Catuḥstava* have been translated into English, though not often.¹⁸

There are many other songs of praise recognized in the Tibetan canon, whose authenticity is more widely debated, including the *Cittavajrastava* (Praise of the diamond mind), a seven-stanza paean to mind itself that is of philosophically idealistic hue, and the *Dharmadhātustava* (Praise of the realm of reality), a 101-stanza celebration—in language reminiscent of buddha-nature discourse—of the pure and luminous realm of reality, which is identical with buddha mind.¹⁹ One other controversial and hard-to-classify text worth mentioning is the *Bodhicittavivaraṇa* (Exposition of the awakening mind), which includes a recounting of many of Nāgārjuna’s familiar ideas, but also launches an extensive critique of the ideas of the Yogācāra school of Mahāyāna philosophy and is taken by most but not all scholars to post-date Nāgārjuna.²⁰



Strategies for Teaching Nāgārjuna

It is one thing to identify important texts for teaching Nāgārjuna; it is quite another to know how to present his ideas, especially that of emptiness. In the following, I will describe four possible approaches to making sense of Nāgārjuna’s thought: (1) *contextual*, in which his ideas are set against the background of non-Buddhist and Buddhist philosophy that pre-dated him, and to which he reacted, either positively or critically; (2) “*controversial*,” in which several disputes entertained by later Buddhists are used to illustrate the complex reverberations of his ideas; (3) *comparative*, in which his ideas are juxtaposed with certain perspectives developed within Western science and philosophy or Asian and other mystical traditions; and (4) *contemplative*,

in which one undertakes analytical and metaphorical meditations on his ideas, so as to gain at least a taste of their place in Buddhist practice.

A Contextual Approach

While very little about Nāgārjuna can be stated unequivocally, there is no doubt that, within the compass of possible religious identities in early first-millennium c.e. India, he was a Buddhist. And, as a Buddhist philosopher, he was marked above all by his rejection of the existence of a permanent, partless, independent self (*ātman*) or metaphysical substance (*svabhāva*)—concepts that were accepted, in one form or another, by nearly every other philosophical school in India, but especially by the Buddhists' main opponents, the Jains and such "Hindu" traditions as Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Nyāya, and Vaiśeṣika. On the broadest level, therefore, Nāgārjuna's views must be set off against mainstream claims to the effect that there is a self that we are or possess and that is the root of our being. The best way to do this is to read selections from such seminal, metaphorically rich Upaniṣads as the *Chāndogya* and *Kaṭha*, and such basic philosophical texts as the *Sāṃkhyakārikā*, *Vaiśeṣikasūtra*, and the Jain scriptures.²¹ Through such reading, we may begin to appreciate how an enduring "self" is a reasonable posit if we wish to explain a variety of basic features of the world, including creation, causation, memory, personal identity, moral responsibility, and rebirth. Granted, Nāgārjuna only occasionally launched frontal assaults on non-Buddhist ideas,²² saving most of his ammunition for Buddhist opponents, but we must recall that his critiques of his Buddhist opponents were predicated on the belief that their views were not sufficiently Buddhist, that is, tended to slide toward the "eternalism" ascribed by many generations of Buddhists to Hindus, Jains, and others (or to the nihilism attributed to skeptics and materialists). An example—crude though it is—I have found useful in explaining the difference between Hindu views of self and that of Buddhists involves comparing the peeling of an avocado with the peeling of an onion. With an avocado (as in Hinduism), we peel away the skin and the flesh (our ignorance and passions), one after another, until one arrives at the solid, pure pit (the self). With the onion (as in Buddhism), we peel away layer after layer (as we investigate things), until finally we arrive at: nothing, for an onion like we ourselves, has no core, no essence, no "self."

As just noted, most scholars believe that Nāgārjuna's main critique was directed against other Buddhists—in particular, against a variety of philosophical schools, most notably the Sarvāstivāda (Realism), that took as their major source the early Buddhist metaphysical compendia that go under the name Abhidharma. Many of these compendia espoused a version of atomistic

realism in which we and the world are deconstructed into mental and physical constituents called dharmas, hence do not possess “self” as it is usually conceived—yet dharmas are held to be irreducible and to possess an inherent nature (*svabhāva*) that makes them what they are. The Sarvāstivāda and most other Abhidharma-based schools came later to be classified by advocates of the Mahāyāna, or Great Vehicle, as “Hīnayāna,” or Lesser-Vehicle traditions, though scholars nowadays prefer less tendentious terms, such as Foundational, Mainstream, or Hearer-Vehicle (Shrāvakayāna) Buddhism.²³ Although Nāgārjuna was the first Buddhist thinker to subject these ideas to rigorous analysis, his critique was anticipated by the earliest sutras of the nascent Mahāyāna movement, including several texts in the series known as the Perfection of Wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*). Although Nāgārjuna does not explicitly acknowledge the Perfection of Wisdom sutras,²⁴ it is hard to imagine that he was unaware of them, given that they assert again and again that all dharmas, “from form up through a buddha’s omniscience,” are thoroughly empty (*shūnya*), and that a bodhisattva, a buddha-to-be, attains full awakening by the paradoxical realization that there is no attainment or awakening.²⁵ It was this kind of assertion, with its attendant paradoxes, that Nāgārjuna would transform into logical argument.

Although a handful of scholars²⁶ have argued that Nāgārjuna was not a proponent of Mahāyāna but simply a reviver of early Buddhist notions of a middle path (*madhyamapratipad*) between ethical, metaphysical, or ontological extremes, such a view only is defensible by narrowing his corpus to four or five works from the Collection on Reasoning. In any case, it was only in Mahāyāna traditions—whether in south, east, or inner Asia—that Nāgārjuna was taken as authoritative; he is cited with approval nowhere in the literature of the Theravāda or other schools of Foundational Buddhism. At the same time, it is quite clear that Nāgārjuna regards himself as a Buddhist fundamentalist,²⁷ in the sense that believes he is cutting through the fog of latter-day mistaken philosophical views and reviving the ontological middle way espoused by the Buddha, wherein things, on the one hand, do not exist—because they are not permanent, partless, or independent—but, on the other hand, do exist in that they are valid as nominal designations of dependently arisen events. In this sense, Nāgārjuna (like the Perfection of Wisdom sutras) may be seen not as undermining early Buddhism, but simply as taking the idea of not-self (*anātman*)²⁸ with the utmost seriousness, by radicalizing and universalizing it so that no entity or concept anywhere is exempted from being seen as selfless or, to use Nāgārjuna’s favored term, empty. Nāgārjuna not only reiterates the centrality of the idea of not-self but also resumes threads from early Buddhism that are critical of conceptual

thought in general and adherence to philosophical views in particular, making it clear that the practical result of an analysis that shows things to be empty is the transcendence of fixed views, the end of mental elaboration (*prapañca*), the uprooting of even the subtlest attachments, and so the attainment of peace.

In short, Nāgārjuna must to some degree be understood against the cultural, religious, and philosophical context from which he emerged: as a Mahāyāna Buddhist thinker, probably influenced by the Perfection of Wisdom literature, who was broadly resistant to the metaphysics of non-Buddhist traditions and a particular critic of the realism of Abhidharma-based schools of Buddhist philosophy, while at the same time drawing on and reshaping early Buddhist ideas of not-self, dependent arising, and the transcendence of conceptual construction, whether those concepts be used for framing theories or perpetuating our passionate engagement in the sufferings of *saṃsāra*.²⁹

A “Controversial” Approach

Nāgārjuna is one of the giants of Indian philosophy, and as with any great thinker, precisely what he meant to say has been a topic of almost constant debate, especially among the Asian Mahāyāna Buddhists who were his heirs. Here, I will touch briefly on three major intra-Buddhist controversies that have colored interpretations of Nāgārjuna over many years—the Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika debate, the divide between Madhyamaka and Yogācāra, and a disagreement over what emptiness is empty of—in the hope that exposing them will provide us with further tools for presenting his thought and the problems inherent in trying to make sense of it for our students.

In the centuries following his death, a number of Nāgārjuna’s works, most prominently the *Madhyamakakārikā*, began to receive the attention of Indian commentators of the school of which he is said to be the founder, the Madhyamaka (Middle Way). Commentaries on the *Madhyamakakārikā* included those by the unknown author of the *Akutoḥbhayā* (third–fourth century?),³⁰ Buddhapālita (fifth century), Bhāviveka³¹ (sixth century), and Candrakīrti (seventh century). The first evidence of a serious divide among Mādhyamikas³² is found in Bhāviveka’s *Prajñāpradīpa* (Lamp of wisdom), which attacks Buddhapālita for treating Nāgārjuna’s philosophical method as purely a reductive (*prasaṅga*) attempt to show the illogical consequences of an opponent’s assertion, hence the emptiness of their concept, without stating a thesis (*pratijñā*) of one’s own. Bhāviveka, who was influenced by the developing Indian science of argumentation, claimed instead that Nāgārjuna’s ideas could be defended by recourse to formal, independent (*svatantra*) reasoning,

indeed, to syllogisms consisting of a subject, predicate, reason, and examples. Candrakīrti, in his *Prasannapadā* (Clear words), criticizes Bhāviveka and defends Buddhapālita, insisting that the Madhyamaka method never can be anything other than a deconstruction of the opponent's argument, and that we should take Nāgārjuna at his word when he claims that he has no thesis to propose.

These two methodologies later were recognized by Tibetan scholars as representing two Madhyamaka sub-schools, the Prāsaṅgika and the Svātantrika, which reflected differing approaches not only to philosophical method but, more broadly, to the question of “compromise” with philosophical trends like Yogācāra “idealism” and the approach to reasoning favored by epistemologists like Dharmakīrti.³³ The period after Candrakīrti actually was dominated by Svātantrikas like Jñānagarbha, Śāntaraṣita, and Kamalaśīla (all eighth-century), and when Buddhism first was transmitted to Tibet from the seventh to ninth centuries, it was the Svātantrika view, with an admixture of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka, that prevailed. Toward the end of the first millennium, however, the Prāsaṅgika interpretation began to find favor among a few Indians, and when Buddhism was retransmitted to Tibet starting in the eleventh century, Candrakīrti's reading of Nāgārjuna gained great prestige and overshadowed other interpretations to such a degree that most Tibetan Buddhist philosophers now regard themselves as Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamikas—without necessarily agreeing on what that means. In any case, the key questions posed by the Prāsaṅgika-Svātantrika dispute are those of philosophical method and the place of conventional knowledge: Was Nāgārjuna uncompromisingly critical of constructive philosophy and conventional knowledge, or did he make some allowances, at least for the purposes of everyday discourse? By extension, given that spiritual liberation requires the eventual transcendence of conceptual thought, is our surest route to it an immediate dropping of concepts, or must we proceed first by way of rational analysis? In Tibet and China, as in India, there was no consensus on these matters, and the tension revealed by the disagreement is as basic to Buddhism today as it was in Nāgārjuna's time, with no resolution in sight—or perhaps even imaginable.

A second controversy concerns the relation between Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka and the theories of the other—and slightly later—major Indian Mahāyāna philosophical school, the Yogācāra (Yoga practice).³⁴ While Mādhyamikas look to the Perfection of Wisdom literature as their main textual source, Yogācāra philosophers like Asaṅga and Vasubandhu (fourth–fifth centuries) drew primarily on other early Mahāyāna sutras, such as the *Laṅkāvatāra* (Descent to Sri Lanka), *Samdhinirmocana* (Untying the knots), and *Dashabhūmika* (Ten stages). These texts were less concerned with asserting

emptiness than with discussing the ways in which the mind fabricates a mistaken view of reality—indeed, fabricates, or even is, reality itself. They also sought to articulate a phenomenology of mental states that accounts for our suffering and our capacity for liberation into a state of buddhahood, a state that is at once utterly non-conceptual and compassionately embodied in the world.³⁵ The Yogācāra spawned not only a vast literature on the structure of consciousness but also texts that focused on the much-discussed concept of Buddha Nature (*buddhadhātu*), or the Matrix of the One Thus-Gone (*tathāgatagarbha*), the idea that all of us are capable of buddhahood because the nature of our mind is fundamentally pure and luminous, and our passions are merely temporary obscurations, which can be eliminated by proper insight into reality.³⁶ The Yogācāra may also be the seedbed of some of the ideas and practices that would inform Buddhist Tantra, which became an increasingly influential part of Indian Mahāyāna after the middle of the first millennium.

The origins of Yogācāra are obscure. It may have been inspired in part by meditative experiments, in part by careful analyses of mental states, such as we see in the Abhidharma-oriented schools of early Buddhism. There is no doubt, however, that it arose in part as a reaction to the perceived nihilism of the Madhyamaka in general and Nāgārjuna in particular. The *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* famously divides the Buddha's teaching into "three turnings of the Dharma-wheel."³⁷ In the first turning, he taught that we, and our world, must be broken down into their constituent dharmas, but he did not posit the selflessness of dharmas, leaving the door open to eternalism, or metaphysical realism. Hence, he turned the wheel a second time, teaching the Perfection of Wisdom sutras and insisting that all dharmas are empty. This, however, left the door open to nihilism, so he turned the wheel a third time, teaching the definitive doctrine, the Yogācāra, which distinguishes those dharmas that are real from those that are not: our mental imputations upon the world are unreal, while the purified awareness that is revealed when imputations are removed is fully real; the world itself is neither fully real nor fully unreal. Although Nāgārjuna never is mentioned, it is clear that ideas like his are a main target of the *Samdhinirmocana's* analysis. This was not lost on Mādhyamikas like Bhāviveka and Candrakīrti, who launched counter-critiques of the Yogācāra, particularly on what they saw as a tendency toward a form of subjective idealism, whereby external phenomena were said to be empty or unreal, but the mind itself granted absolute status. For most Mādhyamikas, objects and subjects had equal ontological status: they were utterly empty of self-existence.³⁸ By the same token, they say, Buddha Nature discourse must be read metaphorically; the true meaning of the concept is simply that the

mind is empty of self-existence, hence capable of change from a deluded to an awakened state.

The question whether Yogācāra really is a form of idealism has been much debated by modern scholars. Some insist that the early Yogācāras, at least, were only interested in emphasizing the degree to which we construct our world out of concepts and passions, not in asserting that the world is literally made of mind-stuff. If so, then perhaps there is less of a gap between Madhyamaka and Yogācāra than would seem to be the case, for Nāgārjuna and other Mādhyamikas were as concerned with stilling concepts or mental elaborations as their counterparts.³⁹ Indeed, many Svātantrika Mādhyamikas found the phenomenology of mind developed within Yogācāra a useful psychological and epistemological complement to their own ontological focus. For them, seeing the world as a mental construction was an effective preparation for realizing its ultimate emptiness. Confined to the conventional realm, the Yogācāra analysis was unobjectionable; on the ultimate level, the mind, like everything else, had to be seen as empty. The Prāsaṅgikas, for their part, were usually uninterested in entertaining the Yogācāra analysis even provisionally, but they conceded that it was a step above Foundational Buddhist realism, hence could help prepare one for the thoroughgoing assertion of emptiness that was their main concern. In any case, an appreciation of the ways in which Nāgārjuna's ontologically deconstructive approach both differed from and resonated with the Yogācāra's constructive epistemology and psychology helps us to see his philosophy within the broader Mahāyāna Buddhist canvas on which he was among the first and most prominent collaborators.

The third controversy—between proponents of intrinsic emptiness (Rangtong) and extrinsic emptiness (Shentong)—has its roots in the Indian Buddhist literature we have been discussing, but has played out most dramatically in Tibet.⁴⁰ In Tibet, as noted, Madhyamaka became the dominant philosophical school, and the writings of Nāgārjuna the supreme expression of the Madhyamaka view. All Tibetan scholastics, therefore, agree that emptiness is the ultimate nature of all concepts and entities. They do not, however, always agree on whether everything is empty in exactly the same way. The Yogācāra school and the literature on Buddha Nature, while still drawing on discourse on emptiness, both had provided positive ways of talking about the nature of mind and buddhahood, and the tantric traditions that were so influential in Tibet often utilized this language and imagery as an aid to contemplative and ritual practice. Thus, certain Tibetan monk-philosophers who considered themselves Mādhyamikas but reflected deeply on Yogācāra and/or Buddha Nature discourse in relation to tantric practice arrived at the conclusion that the enlightened mind was empty in a different way than conventionalities are

empty: the latter are intrinsically empty (*rangtong*), hence devoid of permanent, partless, independent existence; while buddha-mind is empty of that which is extrinsic to it (*shentong*)—*samsāric* delusions and passions—but replete with the qualities of buddhahood, most fundamentally purity and luminosity. The main Shentong criticism of Rangtong was (and is) that it equated the exalted state of buddhahood with mere conventionalities, hence was potentially nihilistic; the principal Rangtong criticism of Shentong was that by exempting buddhahood from the sort of critical analysis applied to worldly phenomena, it fell short of the Mādhyamika ideal, hence led both to a Hindu-style eternalism and to a denigration of conventional reality and knowledge.⁴¹

Since proponents of Rangtong and Shentong all considered themselves Mādhyamikas,⁴² they had to appeal to the writings of Nāgārjuna, but they focused on very different portions of the corpus: those favoring Rangtong centered on the *Madhyamakakārikā* and other texts in the negatively inflected Collection on Reasoning, while those favoring Shentong emphasized the Collection of Praises, with its more positive account of reality and buddhahood. Each, of course, maintained that the corpus it cited reflected Nāgārjuna's true intention, while the other corpus was only provisional. Because much of the scholarship on Nāgārjuna, both in Asia and the West, has been focused on the Collection on Reasoning, the Rangtong view might seem to be the more plausible—but once one admits the Collection of Praises to the discussion, or reads certain passages in the Collection of Reasoning in a different light, it is hard to decide whether Nāgārjuna was unequivocally one or the other, or whether, in fact, he was entirely consistent in answering the question: What is emptiness empty of?

Thus, in studying and teaching Nāgārjuna, it is important to see not just where he came from, culturally and philosophically, but where his ideas led in the centuries after he left the scene. Debates about his philosophical method, his views on the nature and function of mind, and the uniformity of his application of the concept of emptiness all show us interesting divides within Buddhist intellectual traditions and point out starkly the difficulty of ascertaining what Buddhism's most radical philosopher actually thought.

A Comparative Approach

In certain respects, the most obvious way to make sense of Nāgārjuna for a non-Asian audience is to view him through concepts already familiar in Western culture. Indeed, such an approach is very nearly inevitable—especially when an ideological system or cultural practice first is introduced to a foreign setting. The scholars and translators who brought Buddhism to

China, for instance, found that translating Buddhist terms into those familiar from Daoism (Dharma became *dao*, for example) gave the Chinese a foothold they might not otherwise have enjoyed—a practice they called “matching concepts” (*geyi*). Applied to our own situation, this approach has the advantage of giving us a familiar lens through which to view what otherwise might seem utterly alien, but it has the disadvantage of deceiving us into thinking that we have a clear view of a foreign concept, when in fact we are seeing it in a manner that is quite distorted, even if temporarily useful. This caveat notwithstanding, those whose upbringing is mostly or wholly Western cannot help but approach Nāgārjuna through their own experience and knowledge, so in what follows I will suggest three comparison-points from (mostly) Western cultural contexts that may—if applied cautiously—help to illuminate his ideas: science, philosophy, and mysticism.

If there is a common language spoken by most students today, it is that of science, of which one branch in particular may be used to illustrate aspects of Nāgārjuna’s thought: physics.⁴³ I have learned over the years that students with even a cursory understanding of physics, especially at the subatomic level, find emptiness rather easy to grasp intellectually. Nāgārjuna’s insistence that all things are empty of self-existence because they arise and cease through impermanent causes and conditions is, in certain respects, quite similar to the physicist’s description of reality as a constant flux of matter and energy, a set of processes to which no fixed and final identity or metaphysical substance can be assigned. Put more positively, Nāgārjuna’s repeated insistence on the dependently arisen nature of things is easily homologized to the physicist’s reliance upon causal laws—though as we now know, these are more relevant in a Newtonian than a quantum setting.⁴⁴ Physicists also maintain that the stability we impute to ourselves and the world is, in the end, an illusion, a useful fiction at best, and that if we want to know what the world is at the deepest level, we must overcome that illusion. Students of physics, therefore, find it easy to understand Nāgārjuna’s claim to the effect that we see reality rightly only when we eliminate the ideas and imputations through which we typically engage our own lives, other beings, and the environment.

Where the typical physicist and Nāgārjuna part company, however, is at the point where the existential implications of a non-substantialist worldview are considered. For a physicist, to know the world as non-substantial is simply to take a proper intellectual perspective on it; there are no necessary ethical or religious implications of scientific understanding, though of course these can be drawn, and have been. For Nāgārjuna, on the other hand, an intellectual understanding of emptiness is useless in itself; indeed, it is only the first step toward a complete realignment of the way we see and live in the world and,

in the end, attainment of a state of spiritual liberation. As later Mādhyamikas would observe, a philosophically acquired belief in a permanent, partless, independent self is easily dispelled through reason. The hard part is eliminating the innate grasping at such a self, which operates at a psychological and emotional level deeper than intellect, and is, from the Buddhist point of view, the result of many lifetimes of conditioning, hence very hard to overcome. Indeed, it is the purpose of Buddhist path practices, including meditation, to uproot that mistaken view, not just intellectually, but at a “gut” level. For the physicist, these existential conclusions go beyond what is given when we investigate reality; for Nāgārjuna, as for most Buddhists, they are the whole purpose of investigating reality in the first place.

Although there is no exact Indic term precisely equivalent to what is called “philosophy” in the West, Indians thought and wrote about “big” questions in rational and analytical ways that are recognizably philosophical, and Nāgārjuna has been discussed more often as a philosopher than in any other way. In attempting to make sense of his thought—which is challenging even for an Indian—modern scholars often have viewed him through the lens of one or another major Western thinker. Thus, Nāgārjuna has been approached through—to name but a few—Zeno of Elia, Plato, Hume, Kant, Nietzsche, William James, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Derrida.⁴⁵ Each of these attempts to match Nāgārjuna with a Western philosopher no doubt casts some light on the great Mādhyamika, but, like any attempt to view the product of a foreign culture through our own constructs, each is severely limited, as well. This is especially true when the context of the foreign philosopher—as is the case with Nāgārjuna—is essentially religious. Much of modern Western philosophy brackets off religious and spiritual questions, so to view Nāgārjuna through Western lenses is necessarily to miss an important part of the context within which he operated. Furthermore, despite certain consonances between Western and Indian thought in terms of issues and methods, there are many more differences, as well. Even on the level of the “purely philosophical,” comparisons are problematic. Nevertheless, comparisons are inevitable, and in the following I will very quickly sketch three philosophical entry-points for understanding Nāgārjuna: Wittgenstein, Derrida, and recent philosophers of the self; I then will add a note on scholars who have advocated for or against Nāgārjuna’s philosophy and a coda on modern Japanese approaches to his thought.

The analytic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) is a particularly interesting comparison point for Nāgārjuna because in his early work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1923), he sought to describe the world in the quasi-mathematical manner of “logical atomism”—not unlike the way

Buddhist Abhidharma philosophers attempted to describe the world entirely in terms of *dharmas* and their relations. In his posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), he turned his back on the quest for absolute certainty in general and logical atomism in particular, describing the whole enterprise of philosophy as a set of missteps rooted in linguistic confusion—much as Nāgārjuna attempted to undermine metaphysical beliefs that are based on our inability to distinguish names from the realities are supposed to designate.⁴⁶

The French philosopher, Jacques Derrida (1913–2004), saw the entire Western tradition, from Plato through Heidegger, as infected by a “metaphysics of presence” that explicitly or implicitly posited an Absolute Reality and interpreted the world through hierarchically arranged binaries, such as culture and nature, reason and passion, and center and periphery, with the first term exalted and the second pushed to the margins. Through his inquisitive and playful “deconstruction” of classic texts and terms, Derrida sought to overcome the classic binaries and undo the metaphysics behind them. Analogously, Nāgārjuna saw the substantialism and dualism of Abhidharma-based philosophies of his day as deeply erroneous and encouraged Buddhists to liberate themselves by recognizing their incoherence.⁴⁷

More recently, a number of European and American philosophers—including Derek Parfit, Owen Flanagan, and Thomas Metzinger—have taken up the problem of the self and, echoing Hume, concluded that a permanent self is simply a fiction (albeit a useful one) that we superimpose on the flux of experience—though nowadays it is more often described in neuroscientific rather than empirical terms. This denial of a “self of persons” is reminiscent of that posited by Nāgārjuna in chapter 18 of the *Madhyamakakārikā*: a self cannot be found inside or outside the constellation of mental and physical events that encompass what we are.⁴⁸

Most modern scholars of Nāgārjuna have been more interested in description than prescription, but a certain number of them have edged toward (or fallen into) outright advocacy, taking a position on the truth or falsity of Nāgārjuna’s views and arguments. Although early scholars often regarded him as a nihilist, in recent times he has had more proponents than opponents. Many have argued—with varying degrees of sophistication—that he ought to be taken seriously as a philosopher and might have insights and methods to impart that Western thinkers would do well to heed.⁴⁹ Others, however, have analyzed Nāgārjuna’s arguments and found them wanting, questioned his importance in the larger scheme of Indian of Indian philosophy, or revived the charge that he was, quite simply, a nihilist.⁵⁰ Regardless, it is useful for the reader to recognize that not all scholarship on Nāgārjuna is completely

dispassionate, and to be alert to the hidden or overt biases that may turn up in the writings on which we depend for our teaching.

Modern reflection on Nāgārjuna has not, of course, been confined to Westerners. We already have seen that he is actively discussed and interpreted by South Asian and Tibetan scholars, such as the Dalai Lama, who write both for local and international audiences, and we cannot end our discussion of comparative philosophical approaches to his thought without mentioning the Kyoto School of Japanese philosophy, which flourished through much of the twentieth century.⁵¹ The Kyoto School's interpretation of Nāgārjuna differs from that of most other Asian traditions of recent times because it draws its inspiration from two culturally disparate sources: Nāgārjuna's philosophy of emptiness as filtered through Chinese and Japanese sources, especially those connected to Zen; and Western metaphysical and ethical philosophy, as represented by, among others, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, James, Husserl, and Heidegger. The brilliant and creative founder of the Kyoto School, Kitaro Nishida (1870–1940), and his successor, Keiji Nishitani (1900–1990), focused much of their work on the concept of “absolute nothingness” (Jp. *zettai-mu*), which they considered the key to a distinctly “Oriental” ontology that contrasted with the Being-ontology of Western metaphysics. They held that absolute nothingness was the key to overcoming the classic dichotomies of Western thought (e.g., subject/object and being/nothingness) and provided a “foundationless foundation” for living a good and free life. Although Kyoto School philosophers rarely mention Nāgārjuna explicitly, their concept of absolute nothingness clearly is indebted to him, and their sophisticated reflections on the idea provide yet one more avenue into the meaning of Nāgārjuna's thought.

A third and final comparative approach into Nāgārjuna is provided by the discourse and practices of the world's “mystical” traditions, which are marked by a concern with describing and gaining unmediated access to the ultimately real (however that is conceived), typically through means that go beyond rationality. Given Nāgārjuna's concern with realizing emptiness, his critique of traditional philosophy, and his idealization of the serenity of *nirvāṇa*, it is not hard to see Nāgārjuna as a mystic—though admittedly a mystic with a decidedly analytical cast of mind. In the study of mysticism, there are long-standing debates about the cross-cultural unity of mystical experiences, the degree to which they are or are not mediated, their reliability as bearers of truth, and other issues that need not concern us here. What are useful for thinking comparatively about Nāgārjuna are instances in different mystical traditions of negative discourse about ultimate reality and negative approaches to mystical practice, each of which I will discuss briefly.

In many of the world's mystical traditions, ultimate reality is characterized negatively, whether because it is believed to transcend linguistic predication, because it is not a substance like other things, or both. Thus, the ultimate reality in the Hindu Upaniṣads, Brahman, is said to be *neti neti*: “not thus, not thus,” that is, unlike anything limited and worldly, utterly without qualities (*nirguṇa*). The *Daodejing* begins by warning that “the Dao that can be spoken is not the constant Dao” and goes on to talk about the Dao’s usefulness in terms of its emptiness and non-being (*wu*), its lack of being a fixed thing, hence its capacity to become all things. The three Western theistic traditions—Judaism, Islam, and Christianity—all recognize the unsurpassability and ineffability of God, and all contain significant instances of apophatic discourse: describing the divine not in terms of what it is (which can be limiting and misleading) but in terms of what it is not (which may lead to paradox, but is truer to the ultimate). Thus, Kabbalistic Judaism describes the darkness of the divine with the term *ayin* (“nothingness”), Islamic mysticism talks about a state of extinction (*fanā*) that lies near the culmination of the Sufi path, and Christian mystics frequently refer to God in negative terms, most notably in the case of Meister Eckhart, who distinguishes the absolute Godhead, which is “nothing” (*nicht*), from the active God that is the topic of so much Christian theology. In each of these traditions, there is a negative path that corresponds to negative discourse about the ultimate, whether it be the transcendence of plurality and materiality in the Upaniṣads, the way of non-action (*wu-wei*) in Daoism, or Jewish, Islamic, and Christian versions of the *via negativa*, with its emphasis on undertaking ascetic practice and abandoning positive conceptions of God, so as to unite with the illimitable ultimate.

On the surface, there is a striking harmony among all these negative approaches, and between each of them and the thought and practice of Nāgārjuna. After all, if Nāgārjuna can be said to characterize ultimate reality at all, he typically does so in negative terms, as emptiness, and his notion of the Buddhist path (except in the *Ratnāvalī*) seems to be a sort of *via negativa*, in which one negates concepts and entities, drops mental constructions and elaborations, and attains a liberated state, *nirvāṇa* (which may be translated as “extinction”). Must not Nāgārjuna’s emptiness, then, be the same as Brahman without qualities, the Dao as non-being, the Kabbalist’s *ayin*, the Sufi’s *fanā*, or Eckhart’s *nicht*? How much, after all, could nothing differ from nothing?⁵² Tempting as this identification may be, it is profoundly problematic, for the minute we begin to examine the cultural, linguistic, and theological context of each version of “nothing,” it becomes evident that there are in fact differences from one language or cultural setting to another, so that what Nāgārjuna means by “nothing” is not necessarily the same as what a Hindu, Daoist, Jew,

Muslim, or Christian means by the word.⁵³ Given that Mādhyamika Buddhists could not agree on what emptiness meant, it hardly should surprise us that the meanings across cultures turn out to be even more disparate, even when they seem on the surface to be identical. Still, even if sensitivity to context precludes us from establishing complete identity among different cultural articulations of the negative ultimate, it is useful to recognize the human tendency toward such discourse—and the practices related to it—and it helps us considerably in approaching Nāgārjuna as a religious thinker.

A Contemplative Approach

Contemplative education—incorporating meditation into curricular or co-curricular settings—is still in its infancy in the West. It is regarded with suspicion by many academics, who believe that the practice, perhaps the very idea, crosses a “line in the sand” that a dispassionate scholar never should transgress. At the same time, a growing number of professors at a range of institutions in America and elsewhere have experimented with contemplative education, particularly but not solely in classes dealing with Asian religions.⁵⁴ Their rationales may vary, but most would agree that giving students at least a taste of the experiential correlates of religious traditions is simply good pedagogy, another version of the field trips that are ubiquitous in Western education. If we can take students to a Buddhist temple to experience the Buddhist way of life first hand, why not bring the experience into the classroom, whether as part of a class session or after hours in a separate venue? I will not argue for or against contemplative education, but merely reiterate that because Nāgārjuna’s philosophy cannot be fully appreciated outside the context of religious practice, and meditation was and still is an important part of religious life for many (though far from all) Buddhists, one way to further students’ understanding of Nāgārjuna is by way of brief contemplative exercises that may convey at least a sense of the wider cultural context in which he and his Mādhyamika successors operated.

Nāgārjuna left us no clear-cut manual on how to meditate on emptiness, though if we expand our concept of meditation to include serious philosophical reflection, then his entire corpus is a contemplative guidebook. Fortunately for us, later Mahāyāna and Mādhyamika traditions did distill his arguments into guidelines for meditation on emptiness. Such Indian masters as Kamalshīla and Atisha (the former a Svātantrika, the latter a Prāsaṅgika) wrote texts that distilled multiple practices into an easy-to-follow sequence, and the Tibetan masters who followed them refined the genre to an extraordinary degree.⁵⁵ In their expositions of meditation on emptiness, these masters generally divided

the sequence into preliminaries, the actual practice, conclusion, and follow-up. The preliminaries usually involved, at the minimum, chanting to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha; generate the altruistic aspiration to attain awakening for the sake of all sentient beings; and make various offerings (real or imagined) to the buddhas and bodhisattvas. The actual meditation session connected to emptiness usually includes the two main branches of Buddhist meditation: concentration or serenity meditation (*śamatha*) and inquiry-based or insight meditation (*vipashyanā*). Serenity meditation proceeds by taking some object—most commonly the breath or a tranquil image—and maintaining focus on it with as little interruption as possible. Once the mind has been stabilized through serenity practice, it moves on to insight meditation, looking within the “person” or phenomena in an attempt to locate some inherently existing metaphysical substance, then (often) resting in the space-like awareness that results from not finding any such substance. When the meditation is complete, the practitioner dedicates the merit collected by the practice to all beings. After the session ends, the devotee re-engages with the world, striving to see the things he or she encounters and the events that occur as being “illusion-like,” or empty, hence quite un compelling.

In a contemporary educational setting, where the “religious” element may not be appropriate, we might eliminate the aspirational “framing” with which the meditation generally begins and ends, and focus solely on the main practice. The session could begin with a serenity meditation consisting simply of observation of the breath at the point where it comes in and out of the nostrils. Alternately, we can count breaths from one to twenty-one, being careful not to lose track. Still another option is to rest the mind in an open, aware state, without particular mental content. When we shift to insight meditation, we may begin by searching either external phenomena or ourselves for any evidence of a permanent, partless, independent self. We may analyze external phenomena in a number of different ways (all traceable to Nāgārjuna), but the most effective method, the “king of reasons” according to Tibetan tradition, is simply to recognize that all phenomena—including “ideas” and “things”—are “dependent arisings,” that is, come to be on the basis of their parts, their causes, and/or conceptual imputation on our part. As Nāgārjuna tells us in the *Madhyamakakārikā* (24:19), there is no phenomenon that is not dependently arisen, so there is no phenomenon that is not empty. Similarly, we may analyze our own person in a number of different ways, though the most popular is based on the argument at the beginning of chapter 18 of the *Madhyamakakārikā*, where Nāgārjuna demonstrates the impossibility of a permanent self existing *outside* our mind-and-body (i.e., the five aggregates), on the grounds that our mind-and-body are all we can know, or *inside* our

mind-and-body, on the grounds that our mind-and-body are multiple and impermanent, whereas the self we seek is single and permanent. Whichever search we undertake, the self we seek remains in the end unfound, and it is common for that “unfinding” to be taken metaphorically as a “space-like” meditative state, in which we rest the mind in open, unfocused awareness that is analogous to a direct realization of emptiness. We neither reject nor accept thoughts that arise, but simply recognize them for what they are: empty dependent-arisings. And, when the session is over, we try to carry that recognition into our encounters with things and persons in the world.⁵⁶

There are many other contemplative approaches to emptiness we might attempt, such as Zen kōan meditation or tantric techniques for constructing and deconstructing an ideal body, but those require significant cultural immersion, and the instructions of a qualified master. Because it requires no such “initiation,” the sequence suggested above probably is the most fruitful for beginners in a secular educational setting—assuming that the teacher and students are agreed in the first place on the value of contemplative education.



Conclusion

There are far more texts and pedagogical strategies suggested here than any single instructor will want (or be able) to use in teaching Nāgārjuna, and there are others I have not discussed,⁵⁷ but keeping in mind the various perspectives I have introduced will, I hope, make it easier for teachers and students to understand his arguments and their implications. It is, in fact, “much ado about nothing,” but that, it turns out, is inestimably rich and worthy of study.

Notes

1. For a particularly lucid introductions to the concept, see, e.g., Streng 1967; Newland 2008.
2. For good, philosophically oriented overviews of Nāgārjuna, see esp. Robinson 1965: ch. 2; Streng 1967; Warder 1970: 374–387; Ruegg 1980: 32–47; Nagao 1989; Potter 1999: 98–184; Williams 2009: 63–79; and Westerhoff 2009, 2010. Three sources that include translations of multiple works by Nāgārjuna are Lindtner 1982; Tola and Dragonetti 1995b; and Jones 2010. For a selective, annotated bibliography of literature on Nāgārjuna, see Donnelley 2010.
3. On the historical Nāgārjuna, see esp. Walleser [1926] 1979; Ruegg 1981: 4–9; Mabbett 1998; Walser 2005. Walser’s book is an ambitious attempt to situate Nāgārjuna within Buddhist monastic and scholastic debates in second-century south-central India.

4. For perspectives on the extent of the Nāgārjuna corpus, see esp. Ruegg 1981: 8–33; Lindtner 1982: 9–18 et passim; Mabbett 1998; Brunnhölzl 2007: 22–43.
5. The Collection on Reasoning is usually said to comprise six texts: the *Madhyamakakārikā* (Stanzas on the Middle Way), *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (Turning aside objections), *Shūnyatāsaptati* (Seventy [stanzas] on emptiness), *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā* (Sixty [stanzas] on reasoning), *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa* (Pulverizer of categories), and a sixth variously identified as the *Ratnāvalī* (Jewel garland), *Akutobhayā* (The fearless), or *Vyavahārasiddhi* (Proof of convention). The Collection of Praises consists of four core texts, known as the Four Praises (*Catuḥstava*)—usually but not invariably the *Lokātitastava* (Praise of the world-transcending), *Nirauḥpamyastava* (Praise of the incomparable), *Acintyastava* (Praise of the inconceivable), and *Paramārthastava* (Praise of the ultimate)—and over a dozen other panegyrics, of which the best known are the *Paramārthastava* (Praise of the ultimate), *Cittavaḥjraṣṭava* (Praise of the diamond mind), and *Dharmadhātustava* (Praise of the realm of reality). The Collection of Advice consists above all of the *Ratnāvalī* and *Suḥṛllekha* (Friendly letter), both of which are framed as spiritual counsel to a king, but the category also may include the *Bodhicittavivarāṇa* (Exposition of the awakening mind) and *Sūtrasamuccaya* (Compendium of discourses).
6. Scholarly positions range from the minimalist, which accepts some or all of the texts in the Collection on Reasoning; to the intermediate, which accepts works in the Collection on Reasoning and some, but not all, in the other two collections; to the near-maximalist, which accepts most texts in all three collections. For the minimalist position, see Westerhoff 2009: 5–6; for intermediate positions, see Ruegg 1981; and Lindtner 1982; for a near-maximalist position, see Brunnhölzl 2007. A fully maximalist position, of course, is represented by the editors of the Tibetan canon(s).
7. See, e.g., Streng 1967: 181–220; Inada 1970; Kalupahana 1986; Bocking 1995 (from Chinese); Garfield 1995 (from Tibetan); McCagney 1997; Jones 2010; and Siderits and Katsura 2013. For a complete list, see “Mūlamadhyamakakārikā” (online). Three recent translations stand out in particular for their relative clarity and accessibility. Garfield 1995, translated from the Tibetan version, does a fine job of explaining the implications of each verse, especially from the point of view of Tibetan Gelukpa commentarial traditions. (Garfield has updated his translation as a part of a much larger project in Samten and Garfield 2006.) Jones 2010 translates the Sanskrit original into straightforward English and illuminates it with a long chapter-by-chapter commentary and a thoughtful concluding essay. Siderits and Katsura 2013, also based on the Sanskrit, is perhaps the best translation yet to appear, as it combines a solid philosophical introduction, the romanized Sanskrit text, clear translations of the verses, and helpful remarks on each verse based on the commentaries of Nāgārjuna’s great Indian successors, the unknown author of the *Akutobhayā*, Buddhapālita, Bhāviveka, and Candrakīrti. None of these commentaries has been fully translated into English. The *Akutobhayā*, which tradition ascribes to Nāgārjuna himself but which probably post-dates him by a century

- or so, has been discussed in Ruegg 1981: 47–48 and Huntington 1986. The first sixteen chapters of Buddhapālita's *Madhyamakavṛtti* (Commentary on the Middle Way) are translated in Saito 1986. Chapter 2 of Bhāviveka's *Prajñāpradīpa* (Lamp of wisdom) is translated in Ames 1995, and the entire text summarized in Potter 2003: 422–442. Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā* (Clear words) is the most studied of the Indian commentaries; for a sampling of its chapters, see Sprung 1979.
8. For instance, Ruegg 1981: 9–19; Kalupahana 1986: 31–80; Potter 1999: 98–124; Jones 2010: 91–122.
 9. For instance, Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957: 340–345; Strong 2002: 146–151; Olsen 2005: 198–212; Edelglass and Garfield 2009: 26–34.
 10. These are, respectively, Gyamtso 2003 and Dalai Lama 2009. For another partial translation and discussion, see Batchelor 2000. A student who wants to go the other way, and read Tibetan commentaries far more extensive than the *Madhyamakakārikā* itself, should consult Doctor 2011, who translates the commentary by Mabja (twelfth century), preceded by a translation of the root verses from Tibetan (1–82); and Samten and Garfield 2006, who translate the commentary by Tsongkhapa (fifteenth century). Though superb, neither of these works is for the faint of heart!
 11. The sixth text in the Collections of Arguments, the *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa*, is concerned primarily with a refutation of the categories asserted by the Nyāya school of Hindu philosophy. In this respect, it is tangential to Nāgārjuna's other argumentative works, and it has been the least studied of the six. For a study and translation, see Tola and Dragonetti 1995a; for good summaries, see Potter 1999: 153–149; Jones 2010: 79–88.
 12. See, e.g., Streng 1967: 222–227; Bhattacharya et al. 1978; Jones 2010: 34–56; Westerhoff 2013: 19–41. The two most useful versions for the contemporary reader are Jones 2010 and Westerhoff 2013, each of which deals in a different way with the text's peculiar structure: like many Indian objection-and-response texts, the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* is arranged so that all the objections come at the beginning and all the replies after that, making it difficult at times to negotiate. Jones includes the basic verses, rearranged to reflect the give-and-take of objections and replies, followed by his own detailed commentary on the text, in the original order. Westerhoff includes the basic verses, along with Nāgārjuna's own commentary, in their original order, then provides an extensive analysis of his own, interwoven with the basic verses and commentary and rearranged so objections and replies are found together.
 13. For shorter summaries, see, e.g., Ruegg 1981: 21–23; Potter 1999: 124–133; Westerhoff 2013: 11–18.
 14. See, e.g., Lindtner 1982: 35–69; Tola and Dragonetti 1995b: 72–81; Komito 1987: 79–95. See also the very close paraphrase in Jones 2010: 66–73, and the summaries in Ruegg 1981: 20–21 and Potter 1999: 150–153. While the most careful and accurate translation is that found in Lindtner 1982, a more

approachable work for the beginning student is Komito 1987, which includes a long preface on Buddhist psychology and meditation, an unadorned translation of the stanzas, and a lengthy commentary upon them that includes the Tibetan text, the translated verses, and an explanation provided by a modern Tibetan Gelukpa lama, Geshe Sonam Rinchen. Read with the understanding that it views Nāgārjuna's text through a distinctly Tibetan lens, Komito's book can be a useful entrée not just into the *Śūnyatāsaptati* but into Nāgārjuna's thought in general.

15. See, e.g., Lindtner 1982: 103–119; Tola and Dragonetti 1985b: 34–41; Loizzo 2007: 119–126. See also the summaries in Ruegg 1981: 19–20; Potter 1999: 150–153; and Jones 2010: 74–78. The most thorough study is Loizzo 2007, which includes a long introductory analysis of the way the text provides us with a method of “objective self-correction,” a translation of the verses, a translation of a commentary on the verses by Candrakīrti, and critical editions of the Tibetan of the root verses and Candrakīrti's commentary. Those who wish simply to read Nāgārjuna's verses will find themselves well served by the translation in Lindtner 1982.
16. One of Nāgārjuna's most oft-translated texts, the *Suhṛllekha* (Friendly Letter), consists almost entirely of ethical advice for laypeople. Because it has little philosophy in it, it is of less overall interest than the *Ratnāvalī*, though it is indispensable for any investigation of Nāgārjuna's ethics. For translations, see, e.g., Kawamura 1975; Tharchin and Engle 1979; Padmakara 2005.
17. See, e.g., Hopkins et al. 1975; Dunne and McClintock 1997; Hopkins 1998. See also the summaries in Ruegg 1980: 23–26 and Potter 1999: 153–161; and the translation of the philosophical passages from chapters 1, 2, and 3 in Jones 2010: 57–65. Both translations that appeared in the late 1990s are reliable and are valuable for classroom use. Dunne and McClintock 1997 is a clear and straightforward rendition of the text, based on the Sanskrit where it is available, and from the Tibetan otherwise. It includes as an appendix the Tibetan and English of a song praising Nāgārjuna composed by an eighteenth-century Tibetan Gelug master, Könchok Tenpei Drönmé. Hopkins 1998, which translates the Tibetan *Ratnāvalī*, includes a long, analytical introduction; a translation of the verses, linked, in a parallel column, to the text divisions identified by the Tibetan commentator Gyeltsapjé; and the Tibetan text of both the verses and Gyeltsapjé's text-divisions.
18. The most complete and useful presentation is found in Tola and Dragonetti 1995b: 101–133, which should be utilized by anyone intending to study the collection. The second and fourth songs are discussed and translated Tucci 1932, the first and third in Lindtner 1982: 121–161. For brief summaries, see Ruegg 1981: 131–132; Potter 1999: 181–184.
19. For translations, see, respectively, Tola and Dragonetti 1995b: 136 and Brunnhölzl 2007: 117–129. For discussion, see Ruegg 2010: 113–144.

20. For a translation, see Lindtner 1982: 185–217. He believes the text to be early and genuine, while Ruegg 1981: 104–105 considers it the work of a much later, tantric Nāgārjuna.
21. See, e.g., Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957; Sarma 2011.
22. Of his more widely accepted works, the *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa* and *Ratnāvalī* clearly criticize ideas associated with Hindu schools.
23. For useful surveys, see Warder 1970; Williams et al. 2011. For a briefer overview, see Jackson 1997.
24. He is credited by Chinese tradition with a commentary called the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* (Teaching on the Great Perfection of Wisdom [Sutra]), but the attribution of this text to Nāgārjuna has been widely, if not universally, discounted by modern scholars.
25. See, for instance, Conze 1973, 2001; Williams 2009: 45–62.
26. See, e.g., Warder 1970: 376–377; Kalupahana 1986: 7–8.
27. See, e.g., Gómez 1976; Vélez de Cea 2005.
28. On *anātman*, see esp. Collins 1982, as well as the readings found in such anthologies as Conze 1959 and Bodhi 2005.
29. Although it is a bit dated in certain respects, Streng 1967 does as good a job of locating Nāgārjuna within the Indian religious universe as any text before or since, while the most compelling attempt so far to locate Nāgārjuna within his own Buddhist world is Walser 2005.
30. See above, n. 7.
31. Also known as Bhāvaviveka and Bhavya.
32. This is a variation of Madhyamaka, which may denote either the Middle Way school or a person who belongs to that school.
33. On this, see McClintock and Dreyfus 2003; Ruegg 2010: 159–194.
34. Also known, at various times, as Vijñānavāda (consciousness doctrine), Vijñaptimātra (representation-only), or Cittamātra (mind-only), although these terms are not always completely synonymous. For a good overview, see Williams 2009: 84–102.
35. On the “bodies” (*kāya*) of the Buddha, see Williams 2009: 172–186.
36. See Williams 2009: 103–128.
37. See Powers 1995: 93–145.
38. The best-known Madhyamaka critique of Yogācāra is that found in Candrakīrti’s *Madhyamakāvātāra*, which has been translated in English numerous times—and is seen by Tibetan scholars as an implicit commentary on Nāgārjuna’s *Madhyamakakārikā*. For a pioneering study and translation, see Huntington 1989.
39. For arguments to this effect, see Harris 1991; Nagao 1991.
40. For a brief introduction, see Williams 2009: 112–115. For more detailed discussions, see Hookham 1991: section 1; Magee 1999; Stearns 1999; Ruegg 2010: 289–322.
41. For a good discussion of Tibetan debates about the relation between ultimate and conventional truth, see Thakchoe 2007. See also Cowherds 2011.

42. Shentongpas often referred to their stance as “Great Madhyamaka,” which they distinguished from Prāsāṅgika, and which they considered to incorporate the views not only of Nāgārjuna, but Asaṅga and other Yogācāras, too.
43. For particularly thoughtful comparative treatments of the relation between Buddhism and a number of sciences, see Hayward 1987; Wallace 2003; and Dalai Lama 2006. The last, in particular, is a good basis for discussion of the points of connection and disconnection between Buddhist and scientific perspectives on the world. For a critical look at the Buddhism-science “dialogue,” see Lopez 2010.
44. For reflections on quantum theory vis-à-vis Buddhism, see, e.g., Ames 2003; Dalai Lama 2006: ch. 3.
45. The best overview of the treatment of Nāgārjuna in terms of Western philosophy is Tuck 1990. See also the analyses in Loy 1997 and Garfield 2002.
46. On Wittgenstein and Nāgārjuna, see, e.g., Gudmunsen 1977; Tuck 1990: 74–93.
47. On Derrida and Nāgārjuna, see, e.g., Magliola 1984; Jackson 1989; Park 2006. See also Loy 1997, which discusses Derrida as part of a sophisticated study of the concept of non-duality across Asian and Western cultures.
48. See, e.g., Parfit 1984; Flanagan 2002, 2011; Metzinger 2009. Each of these philosophers is conscious of his relation to Buddhism. For a similar view expressed from a psychological point of view, see Epstein 2013.
49. See, e.g., Thurman 1984: 21–28; Kalupahana 1986: 1–93; Garfield 2002: part I.
50. Richard Robinson 1972 analyzed Nāgārjuna’s logic, found it wanting at times, and ridiculed the idea that Nāgārjuna had managed to refute all philosophical systems. Richard Hayes 1994 maintained that Nāgārjuna had far less influence on Indian philosophy than generally believed, that many of his arguments in any case rely on linguistic trickery rather than sound reasoning, and that translators of Nāgārjuna often deliberately misrepresent his verses to make their arguments seem more coherent than they are. David Burton 1999 concluded after careful investigation that Nāgārjuna was, in fact, a nihilist, whose philosophy of emptiness utterly devalues the conventional world. A more recent, and quite incisive, critique, is found in Arnold 2005, part III (esp. ch. 7), which focuses primarily on Candrakīrti, but has implications for the assessment of Nāgārjuna, as well.
51. See, e.g., Franck 2004; Davis 2010.
52. For a classic exposition of this view with regard to Eckhart and Mahāyāna Buddhism, see Suzuki 1957: 1–99.
53. For a superb argument to this effect, see Katz 1978: 51–54.
54. See, e.g., Barbezat and Bush 2013.
55. See, e.g., Guenther 1959; Atīśa 1983; Pabongka 1993; Dalai Lama 2003.
56. For contemporary descriptions of these or similar meditations rooted in Tibetan tradition, see, e.g., Jamgön Kongtrul 1992; McDonald 2005: 37–44, 53–58; and the more extended discussions in Rabten 1983; Schmidt 2002; Tsering 2009; Williams 2009: 79–81; Tegchok 2012.

57. One would be to take an aesthetic approach, which would consider the reverberations of Nāgārjuna's discourse on emptiness in the practice of a variety of art forms, such as painting, architecture, music, or poetry. On poetry, see, for instance, LaFleur 1988: 63–76; Hass 1995; Jinpa and Elsner 2000: 83–113; Grant 2003; Jackson 2004.

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Teaching Yogācāra Buddhism Using Cognitive Science

William S. Waldron

Introduction

Have you ever wondered if what you perceive is how the world actually is? After all, we perceive things that do not “exist” in the ordinary sense of the word, such as rainbows, mirages, dreams, and optical illusions of all sorts. We know color-blind people whose experience of the seemingly obvious—that red is red and green is green—differs considerably from our own. And we have not even mentioned what house flies must experience with their multifaceted eyes or what bats “see” through echolocation. Moreover, we deal on a daily basis with seeming entities that arguably do not exist in a concrete, tangible sense but that nevertheless play important roles in our cultural worlds, such as ideas of race, ethnicity and gender, and abstract entities like language, economy, or, most immediately for most of us: our identity. Researchers in the cognitive sciences overwhelmingly agree that our ordinary perceptions and conceptions of the world are complex constructs fashioned by our cognitive faculties, both individually and collectively, even while they recognize that these constructive processes are relatively consistent and dependable and, for most purposes, practical and effective.

This consensus in the cognitive sciences provides us with a ready entrée to the main ideas of the second major school of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism, Yogācāra (“Practitioners of Yoga”). Yogācāra was classically formulated in India from the third to the fifth century c.e., but ultimately influenced all later schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India, Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan. However, Yogācāra’s comprehensive and complex sets of doctrines have until

quite recently made it the most impenetrable and misunderstood of Indian Buddhist schools. Luckily, we can now use ideas from modern cognitive science to make Yogācāra more accessible and comprehensible, particularly their understanding of cognition, which is the primary focus of this chapter.

These basic ideas are: (1) the hermeneutical strategy expressed in the “Three Turnings of the Wheel”; (2) the observation that our ordinary experiences are just cognitive constructs or, more technically, Appearances or Representations-Only (*viññapti-mātra*); (3) that these constructs are so similar that we experience a shared or species-specific “world” (*bhājana-loka*); (4) which is based on similar predispositions or “impressions” (*vāsanā*) “stored” in our subconscious minds (“storehouse consciousness,” *ālaya-vijñāna*); (5) that, under the influence of these predispositions, we instinctively feel that we are autonomous subjects apprehending independent objects that exist “out there”; and (6) that this dualistic experience of subject and object (*grāhaka, grāhya*) is, for the Yogācārins, our fundamental cognitive “fault,” which may however be wholly transformed by correctly understanding the causes and conditions that give rise to such false appearances—a process encapsulated in the so-called “Three Natures” (*tri-svabhāva*).

These ideas, of course, arose within a specific historical context. If one teaches Buddhist thought chronologically, Yogācāra would follow early Buddhism and Abhidharma (500 BCE–200 C.E.), with which it shared many features, and then the Madhyamaka or “Middle Way” school (from ca. 100–200 C.E.), with its emphasis on the concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Thus, to adequately approach Yogācāra thought students should have some understanding of such basic Buddhist ideas as the Four Noble Truths, no-self, and dependent arising. However, as fundamental as these ideas are, it is easy to overlook their deeper implications. This is hardly surprising; after his own Awakening the Buddha said that dependent arising is “difficult to see, difficult to realize, calm, peaceful and subtle” (M I.168); and the Mādhyamikans famously treat dependent arising as synonymous with emptiness. Hence, thoroughly examining the implications of dependent arising early in the course will make the later developments, such as emptiness and Appearance-Only, much easier to grasp, and hence much less likely to be misunderstood.

This in turn requires that students need to learn to think in terms of dependent arising, that is, in terms of *patterns of impersonal causal interactions*, the mode of analysis most favored in systematic Indian Buddhist thought. This is not as difficult as it sounds, though, since most students already have some familiarity with scientific modes of thinking, which analyze “how things come to be” in terms of patterns of causal interaction. Most students, though, will need to have this similarity explicitly pointed out.¹ They can, for example,

readily recognize the parallels between a psychological analysis of the results of actions being reinforced and repeated until they become entrenched and embodied habits, with the Buddhist analysis of a circular feedback process between the three categories of action (*karma*), its results (*phala*), and our afflictive responses (*klesha*) leading to more actions, and so on (categories into which traditional Buddhists grouped the twelve members of the formula of dependent arising). Moreover, they can readily understand through examples from economics and ecology that not only are the constituent elements in their fields necessarily defined in relation to each other, but that their entire discipline focuses on how things come about through dynamic patterns of interaction. By way of contrast, insofar as we depart from this impersonal yet dynamic causal syntax and loosely speak in everyday terms—in the conventional terms of persons or consciousness as independent agents acting upon independent objects—then we invite misunderstanding and misguided reification (taking processes as things). As Yogācārins point out, the very ideas of subject and object are logically as well as psychologically defined only in terms of each other. This obvious but easily overlooked point is crucially important for teaching Yogācāra because their basic perspective will be misunderstood if we carelessly speak of consciousness or mind as if they really were independent agents. (This is a misunderstanding that has repeatedly happened in ancient India and elsewhere.) Indeed, the most controversial question concerning Yogācāra is precisely this question of whether or not (or to what extent) Yogācāra actually reifies mind as an independently existing subject. Addressing this question largely depends on what we think the purpose of teaching emptiness is—and this is one of the basic themes of the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra*.



Three Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma: Analogies with Modernism

It is important that Yogācāra thought developed some two centuries after Nāgārjuna (ca. 100–200 C.E.) initiated the Madhyamaka school, since the first and most important “Yogācāra sūtra,” the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra*, “The Discourse that Explicates the Implicit Intent” (200–300 C.E.), takes up where Nāgārjuna leaves off. While emptiness was evocatively expressed in the voluminous versions of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras*, it was Nāgārjuna who first formalized emptiness philosophically, defining it as the absence of any unchanging essence or own-being (*svabhāva*). As such, it is primarily an ontological concept, expressing what things are or how they exist. The

Samdhinirmocana Sūtra, however, claims to “Explicate the [Buddha’s] Implicit Intent” for teaching the concept of emptiness in the first place: it is for sentient beings who have the cognitive propensities toward imputing unchanging natures or essences (*svabhāva*) to things.² The *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* thus self-consciously situates itself in relation to Nāgārjuna and the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra* by reframing the “intent” of emptiness in explicitly epistemological or cognitive terms. We all suffer from the tendency to impute essences where they do not exist and, the *Sūtra* states, it is precisely in order to remedy this tendency, and the suffering that results from it, that the Buddha taught the doctrine of emptiness. Thus, although emptiness seems to be an ontological concept about how things exist, the “real” purpose of teaching emptiness—its implicit intent—is cognitive transformation, since imputing essences is ultimately a cognitive problem.

The first way the *Sūtra* reframes the meaning of emptiness is by the hermeneutical strategy expressed in the “Three Turnings of the Wheel.” These represent three different ways that the Buddha taught the Dharma, each appropriate to its own time, place, and audience. The First Turning, referring to early Buddhism and Abhidharma, assumes that the world we experience is, for all intents and purposes, real. There are indeed things in the world and even though such things are composite and made of parts, their constituent components (*dharmas*) are real, substantive entities. This approach is said to be useful and effective for those of relatively limited capacity, but it is open to critical analysis. Thus, the Buddha teaches in the Second Turning of the Wheel, the *Perfection of Wisdom* teachings, that even these components, these *dharmas*, lack essence—that is, they too are “empty” of own-being (*svabhāva*). This “Turning” is also said to be useful and effective. But, the *Sūtra* warns, there were people who mistook this straightforward negation as an ontological position—and an exclusively negative one, suggesting that nothing whatsoever exists—rather than correctly taking it as an effective remedy for reification. It was thus necessary to turn the Wheel of Dharma a third time, in the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* itself, which explicitly states that emptiness is taught as a remedy for our innate dispositions toward reification. The *Sūtra* thus “explicates the implicit intent,” the real reason why emptiness was taught in the earlier *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras*.

Now, this is often too historically remote and obscure for many students—too many texts, too many schools, and too many concepts over too many centuries. Fortunately, they are already familiar with other examples of critical historical self-awareness that we can draw upon, through skillful Socratic dialogue if possible, to help them appreciate these developments. As their

names suggest, “modern art” self-consciously positions itself in relation to traditions that preceded it, while “postmodern art” contrasts itself to modern art. But the parallels with the Three Turnings of the Wheel go even further than nomenclature. For, just as the realism of the First Turning is critiqued by the “anti-realism” of emptiness in the Second Turning, so too is the “realistic” representationalism of pre-modern art critiqued by the non-figural abstractionism of modern art. But merely “unmasking” the pre-modern pretense that art is an accurate representation of the world—and not simply an artifice or construction—is only halfway to postmodernism. For insofar as modernism is still defined negatively in contrast to the pre-modern, it is still committed to positively representing, albeit abstractly, how things “really are.” So it, too, needs to be superseded, since it is so closely defined by the framework it critiques. Thus, like the Third Turning in relation to the Second, postmodernism makes explicit the implicit modernist point that art is always *just* an artificial act of re-presenting the world, not as it truly is in and of itself, but as it is made to appear in human terms, serving human interests and purposes, and utilizing quintessentially human ways of knowing. It is not a better way of “getting it right,” since all art is still, at bottom, inescapably artifice.

In other words, while the realism of early Buddhism, like Western pre-modern art, attempts to represent the world as accurately as possible, both Madhyamaka and modernism unmask the ultimate unreality or artifice of these representations. Arguably, though, it is Yogācāra and postmodernism that explicitly state that this unmasking process is itself only relevant as a remedy for the tendencies toward realism that preceded them. These remedies, therefore, should not be taken as new ontologies, as new versions of reality, for they are merely correctives of the old ontologies, the old versions. To put this in somewhat different terms, while both Madhyamaka and modernism unmoored the signifier from the signified—the representation from the represented—it took the Yogācārin-like postmodernists to acknowledge, indeed to revel in, the free play of the “signifier” in a world now explicitly recognized as “just representations.”

Many of our students, in sum, already implicitly understand the historical starting point of the Yogācāra school: the transition first from realism to its ontological critique, then to an explicitly cognitive understanding of the need for that critique, and finally leading to the recognition of the constructed nature of all ordinary experience. It is up to us teachers, though, to make all this explicit. And while these parallels certainly have their limitations (indeed, raising the very topic of postmodernism could become an inescapable morass), they are suggestive enough to get students thinking in the complex

and historically reflexive mode necessary to initiate them into the worldview of classical Yogācāra Buddhism.



Cognitive Domains and Cognitive Constructs-Only (vijñapti-mātra)

The notion of Appearances or “Representations-Only” (*vijñapti-mātra*) has even stronger parallels with current perspectives in cognitive science. Most cognitive scientists agree that what we perceive in the world—not just the objects and entities but also their specific qualities, their colors, shapes, sounds, and smells—result from the interaction between sensory stimuli and our complex, constructive cognitive processes. These processes occur automatically and unconsciously, whether we want them to or not, whether we are aware of them or not. In this sense, the “world” as we experience it is a complex cognitive construction and not at all what it appears to be: a direct, unmediated perception of the world as it is in and of itself. Cognitive scientists thus broadly agree that perception is illusory—in the specific sense that what we perceive is not what it appears to be—though they disagree among themselves on the exact nature of these percepts and the processes involved in their construction.³ This is an important and expanding field of cognitive science and students find it interesting in its own sake as well as useful for approaching Yogācāra ideas.

Yogācārin Buddhists similarly argue that the world (*loka*) we experience is just a cognitive construct, a mere representation, only an appearance (all workable translations of the key Yogācāra term, *vijñapti-mātra*). Like cognitive scientists, Yogācārins argue that ordinary beings like us do not see the world as “it really is” (*yathā-bhūtam*). Rather, our perceptions are so mediated by our sense faculties and so constructed by our underlying cognitive processes that our ordinary experiences are, in effect, “cognitively closed.” That is, our cognitive faculties effectively delimit the scope and range of our perceptual experience: we cannot see ultra-violet light nor hear the high pitches dogs do. We live, rather, in a cognitive domain or “world” (*loka*) that is determined as much by the structure of our sense faculties as by the apparently external “objects” we perceive.⁴ Indeed, we must ask: How could our perceptions appear in any other way than how our sense faculties allow? We cannot choose to see the same way flies do nor hear the sounds whales do. Nor can we just decide to bypass our own retinas, eardrums, or sense of touch or smell and thereby perceive everything directly. Once they think about it, students understand that the structural constraints of our senses are an inseparable part of experience itself. Indeed, they are *constitutive* of it.

Unlike the parallel with modernism, though, most students do not know much about the cognitive science of perception. I have found that short, pointed readings (e.g., chapters from introductory works on cognitive science) are very effective in conveying this essential but disturbing point about the closed and constructed nature of ordinary perception. For example, Blackmore (2005) succinctly introduces students to the “Hard Problem” raised by purely materialistic explanations of consciousness, to our tendencies to reify consciousness and its objects in the “Cartesian Theater” of our minds, to nonconscious perception (“blindsight”), blindness due to inattention, and, finally, to the idea that all ordinary perception is “A Grand Illusion.” In a similar vein, Metzinger (2011) discusses such problems as how we cognitively construct “The Appearance of a World,” “The Lived Moment,” and “The Unity of Consciousness,” why we can never directly see these constructive cognitive processes, and “How You Were Born as a Naïve Realist.” Although most teachers will advisedly select a few among these many topics to discuss, an understanding of such concepts will help students more easily approach the dense Buddhist analyses of cognition and the Yogācāra arguments for *viññapti-mātra*. This is the pattern I have found useful for introducing much of this material: it seems more effective to prepare students with ideas from the cognitive sciences than to introduce involved Buddhist concepts directly, even if they have to learn new scientific ideas. As is often the case, we need to couch the radically unfamiliar in terms of the vaguely familiar—at least at first.



*Cognitive Worlds Based on Unconscious
Dispositions: Developmental
and Evolutionary Influences*

Once this notion of the “cognitive construction of reality” is appreciated, it is then easy to see why we need to analyze and investigate the underlying processes that bring all this about, processes that can be analyzed at both the individual and species levels, that is, both ontogenetically and phylogenetically. Explaining all this to students involves a series of relatively simple concepts that together provide a powerful, if complex, cognitive model.

First, most of these constructive processes occur unconsciously. Most students readily comprehend that we cannot directly perceive the way our brain processes the information that comes in from our sense organs. We cannot directly perceive how or why we experience colors or sounds the way we do, nor

can we directly observe how we parse all the phonemes and grammatical patterns in an ordinary conversation. Nevertheless, all of us do all this endlessly, effortlessly, and nearly unconsciously, day in and day out. Cognitive scientists and Yogācārins also argue that some perception occurs just below conscious awareness, subliminally. For example, when we are awake we always have an unconscious sense of where our body is in relation to its immediate environment, a sense scientists call proprioception. Most of the time we are barely aware of how we are sitting at a table or walking through a room or down the street. But sometimes this non-conscious sense becomes conscious: if we are sitting in a parked train or car and the vehicle next to us starts moving, for a disconcerting moment we are not sure which one of us is actually moving. All of our other senses are similarly working full-time, constantly constructing our perceptions and construing our world with very little overt awareness of it—unless or until these constructive processes are impaired by injury or intoxication, when they are noticeable by their absence, or become the object of acute scrutiny during advanced meditation.

Second, most students understand that our individual development, our ontogeny, involves long-term learning processes. They readily understand that our perceptual abilities grow and develop during infancy and beyond, and that this requires both sensory input and the ability to respond appropriately. These processes also depend on neurological processes: each time neurons respond to a similar stimulus the connections between them get stronger, creating neural networks that are progressively reinforced until they become well-worn paths that fire together quickly, efficiently, and automatically. This is aptly described by Hebb's Rule: "Neurons that fire together, wire together."

Interestingly, and this is the third point, this learning process also requires active responses, a point made memorable by a poignant example from cognitive science. Kittens have a very short critical period within which their visual system must develop. If they are deprived of specific visual input during this period they will never develop the neural connections necessary for normal cat-like vision. If, for example, kittens are never exposed to horizontal lines during this critical stage they will never be able to "see" them as adult cats and will inadvertently fall off the edges of tables or steps. Surprisingly, though, this also occurs when kittens are exposed to horizontal lines but are prevented from actively responding to them, by, for example, being a passive rider in a cart pulled by another kitten. But, by contrast, the pulling kitten's visual system is coordinated with its muscular responses and so its visual faculties develop normally.

These examples illustrate the ongoing and active feedback relationship—between sensory input, complex constructive cognitive processes, and active

responses leading to new sensory input—that is necessary for the sense faculties to fully develop and mature. This is not a mysterious or unknown process, although most students have probably not thought about it much.

Fourth, thinking about cognition—as an ongoing product of unconscious, constructive, and cumulative processes—also helps students make more sense of the abstruse and oft misconstrued Yogācāra concept of the “storehouse” consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*). The storehouse consciousness refers to a level of unconscious mental processes that is said to “store” all the impressions (*vāsanā*) from our past experiences and all the “seeds” of our past actions (*karma*). These refer, respectively, to our predispositions to experience things in certain ways and the potential for our past actions to lead to future results. These predispositions and potentialities constantly influence how our subliminal mental processes (*ālaya-vijñāna*) operate, all of which continuously support and inform how we consciously experience things from moment to moment. This is an explicit theory of unconscious cognitive constructivism, the idea that our present perceptions are constructed through ongoing cognitive processes that we have little or no awareness of.

Fifth, also like the cognitive scientists, Yogācārins further argue that these constructive cognitive processes develop over time through a continuous, extended feedback process between subliminal and supraliminal levels of awareness: active conscious life leaves impressions (*vāsanā*) “in” *ālaya-vijñāna*, which thereafter “in-form” the way we consciously experience the world—a feedback process that results in our cognitive abilities becoming, as one Yogācāra neatly puts it: “progressively more well-nurtured, well-tempered, and distinct.”⁵ That is, much like Hebb’s Rule or the example of the kittens, the way our cognitive faculties operate from moment to moment depends upon their specific structure, which reflects the accumulative results of previous interactive processes. Our sense faculties do not come fully formed at birth; they grow and develop over time through active engagement with incoming information—and that only becomes “in-formation” through such interaction. This is implicit in the formula of dependent arising, which must, however, be pointed out.

So far we have only discussed individual development, that is, our ontogeny. But, and this is our last point, we need to extend the analysis of the cognitive processes that underlie conscious perception even further. I therefore introduce the topic of evolution in general and the evolution of our species (our phylogeny) in particular. Again, since most students have only a fuzzy understanding of evolution and natural selection to be useful these must be briefly explained. Briefly, what evolves over multiple generations are those capacities and characteristics of organisms that conduce to greater reproduction, a

process called differential reproductive success: whatever was more reproductive in the past is more plentiful in the present. This includes the cognitive faculties as well, which typically evolve through incremental changes in constant interaction with a species' natural and social environments. Both Buddhists and biologists thus recognize that our human cognitive faculties—and by extension the respective cognitive domains (*loka*) they help determine—did not evolve out of thin air; they grew and developed phylogenetically over many generations (or many lifetimes, as the Buddhists put it) by building upon the cumulative results of previous interactions with our environments. This long-term view, discussed later, is an oft-overlooked dimension of Buddhist thinking that is helpfully highlighted by the comparison with evolution.

In sum, the cognitive model based on *ālaya-vijñāna* has strong parallels with those found in cognitive science, for they both describe largely constructive cognitive processes that operate simultaneously from moment to moment, that substantially develop during one's lifetime, and that have evolved over multiple generations or lifetimes.⁶ Phylogeny and ontogeny thus follow the same basic causal pattern, the pattern of dependent arising: they develop through multiple feedback processes between subliminal and supraliminal mental processes, between the actions these processes promote and their accumulative results, and between organisms and their physical, social, and—for humans at least—cultural environments. Admittedly, these ideas take time to sink in.



“Shared Cognitive World” (bhājana-loka): Our Species-Specific World of Experience

The recognition that the “cognitive domain” (*loka*) of a species depends upon the structure of its evolved cognitive faculties raises a further set of interesting and useful commonalities between cognitive science and Yogācāra thought. As in evolutionary science, Yogācāra analyses of the contents of our cognitive experience—of the way things appear to us—are not limited to the level of the individual. We all intuit at some level that our “cognitive worlds” are not strictly individual, since each member of a species enjoys similar cognitive faculties, which give rise to similar or species-specific “worlds of experience.” That is, species gradually evolve over time in the course of which their sense faculties slowly develop in interaction with specific physical and social environments, the sum results of which facilitate common or shared modes of engaging relevant aspects of their surrounding world—indeed they help

define that “world.” And since most of these cognitive processes occur unconsciously and automatically, all members of a species live, in effect, in a *common yet unconsciously constructed world of experience*. Students may not have thought about this very much, but unlike the idea of “cognitive constructivism” one does not need specialized knowledge to make sense of it. It is implicit in the general evolutionary understanding of our world, which most students have more or less imbibed with their modern educations.

From this perspective, we can once again make better sense of an abstruse aspect of the storehouse consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*). The storehouse consciousness is said to comprise the predispositions (*vāsanā*) toward experiencing a “cognitive domain,” not just as an individual but also in common, species-specific ways. This point is overlooked in many treatments of Yogācāra, since the term for our common world is typically translated as the “receptacle world” (*bhājana-loka*), as if it referred to an objective world existing “out there” independently of our cognitive engagement with it. But this is not what the term “world” (*loka*) means in either the early Buddhist discourses⁷ or in some Abhidharma texts,⁸ and it is not what it means in Yogācāra. It refers more accurately to our species-specific, “common world of experience.”⁹

Our common world of experience, together with the unconscious processes that help construct it, is based on more than our similar sensory faculties, however. We human beings also share common modes of conceptualizing our worlds; indeed, it is difficult to completely separate sensory from conceptual modes of cognition.¹⁰ Accordingly, Yogācārin thinkers posit both an individual level of unconscious mental processes (*asādhāraṇa ālaya-vijñāna*) based upon an individual’s sense faculties, as well as a common aspect (*sādhāraṇa ālaya-vijñāna*) that is closely associated with the predispositions or impressions of language (*abhilāpa-vāsanā*) and concepts (*vikalpa*). It is through these common influences that, as social and cultural beings, we experience shared social and cultural realities influenced by specific social and cultural practices. An important passage from the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* describes this core idea:

The mind with all the seeds (*i.e. ālaya-vijñāna*) matures, congeals, grows, develops, and increases based upon . . . the substratum of the material sense-faculties along with their supports and the substratum which consists of the predispositions toward conceptual proliferation in terms of conventional usage of images, names, and conceptualizations.¹¹

This idea—that our distinctively human modes of cognition are not just permeated by language but to a large degree constituted by conceptualization—has a

long and deep history in Indian Buddhist thought, as well as many parallels in modern philosophy from Heidegger to Wittgenstein to Derrida. This rich field is also being explored by contemporary cognitive scientists such as Michael Tomasello and Terrance Deacon, who argue that the key cognitive development for *Homo sapiens* was our ability to pay attention to similar things, making them common (the etymology of “communication”). As a primary means of communication, our common linguistic reference has come to influence human cognition to such a degree that our basic experience of the “world” is indelibly colored by the names, concepts, and even syntax of human language.¹²

Lest this seem too abstract to young, often monolingual American minds, we can bring this point home by simple but illustrative examples. A recent *New York Times* article “Does Your Language Shape How You Think?” describes an Australian aboriginal language whose directional terms, like our “left,” “right,” “front,” and “back,” are not defined in relation to their own bodies, and hence shift as they move them, but in relation to unchanging cardinal directions, north, south, and so on—and these are used in all circumstances. They simply do not have words for left, right, front, or behind. Consequently, speakers of that language experience their world in distinctive ways: they always know where they are in relation to north, south, east, and west, even when they are underwater or blindfolded in darkened rooms and spun around until they are dizzy! Thus to become competent in their own language they must constantly, and mostly unconsciously, master orienting themselves accordingly—something which would require considerable effort and attention for the rest of us.¹³

This well illustrates, I think, the idea of the “common aspect of *ālaya-vijñāna*” as a theory of our “collective, unconscious structuring of our world” based on concepts and language. This example makes an abstract concept, couched in complex foreign terms, more concrete and comprehensible.



Our Cultural Heritage: Constructions of Self and Other, Subject and Object

The most crucial—yet still collective—cultural construct for human beings is arguably our sense of self. While students typically cherish the idea that their “true self” is somehow individual, indubitable, and inviolable, at the same time they also routinely speak of “constructing their identities”—so thoroughly have they absorbed the social scientific notion of identity as a social construct or ongoing personal project. If we consider this socio-developmental conception of identity construction in light of the idea of the evolution of

“unconscious construction of our species-specific world,” then we can come to similar conclusions about our sense of self: not only has our sense of ourselves as a separate, self-contained entity evolved over time at the phylogenetic or species level, and developed throughout infancy, childhood, and beyond, at the ontogenetic or individual level; but this sense of self continuously operates from moment to moment mostly unconsciously and automatically as well, helping to construct an ever-present yet unconscious sense of our self as separate from the external world around us. These ideas dovetail remarkably well with the second innovative strata of mind posited by Yogācārin philosophers: the concept of *kliṣṭa-manas*, “afflicted mind.” This concept refers to our continuing sense of self, self-love, and conceit that is said to uninterruptedly occur in every moment, albeit karmically neutral and outside our immediate awareness. As with the set of ideas explaining our constructive cognitive processes, I find that this complex concept is best conveyed through a series of related concepts.

One of the biggest challenges of teaching Buddhist thought is the concept of no-self (*an-ātman*), that there is no unchanging entity existing independently of the processes of living itself. This runs counter to the deeply intuitive sense we have of ourselves as inner witnesses watching the movie going on all around us—the “Cartesian Theater” mentioned above—which characterizes most human self-consciousness. And it is precisely this sense of being a fixed, independently existing entity that is most directly challenged both by modern cognitive science and by Buddhist thought—indeed, it constitutes one of their most important commonalities.¹⁴ One of the chief explanatory challenges for both Buddhists and cognitive scientists therefore is to *account for our sense of subjectivity* without accepting it at face value: Why does it seem that we are separate selves and entities when our most trenchant analysis proves otherwise? Or to put it more “Buddhistically”: What are the causes and conditions by means of which we experience ourselves as an unchanging self separate from the world we perceive?

The Yogācārin answer this question with the concepts outlined above: we are constantly but unconsciously aware of the world (*ālaya-vijñāna*) in a way that is constantly in-formed, on the one hand, by “the predispositions toward conceptual proliferation in terms of conventional usage of images, names, and conceptualizations” and, on the other hand, by an “indiscernible perception of the external world.” This leads us to (more or less) unconsciously experience the world in terms of our own cultural and linguistic categories—“things,” “selves,” and so on—even when we are not explicitly doing so, just as those Australian aborigine speakers are always more or less unconsciously aware of the four cardinal directions—even when they are not talking. Indeed, it is

difficult to not act as if names correspond to things that exist independently. This is especially true for our deeply ingrained sense of self, which is subtly reinforced every time we use the first-person pronoun, “I”—a development which begins in our second year.

The development of our ingrained sense of self can, I think, be most easily explained by citing evolutionary biology and cognitive science. Early humans evolved psychologically, as well as physiologically, in social groups. This means that most of our cognitive capacities, especially the use of language entailing the first-person pronoun, evolved through constant social interaction over countless generations; this is a simple but important point that most students do not fully appreciate. Our human sense of identity is thus an evolved sense as well as an inescapably social and linguistic one.¹⁵ This point may be further reinforced by reference to developmental psychology, which has charted how self-identity develops from infancy to adulthood in dependence upon ongoing social interaction and the acquisition of language—especially the capacity for self-reference that language enables.¹⁶ Our inescapable sociality, our acute subjectivity, and the role language plays in self-referentiality—all these appear to be inseparably intertwined in our social species.

Functionally speaking, the idea of an unchanging self (*ātman*) that somehow exists independently of and separate from our ongoing bodily, emotional, and cognitive processes is rejected outright by most modern philosophers of mind as well as cognitive scientists. Philosophically, such a notion invites all the problems of Cartesian dualism, of explaining how an immaterial knowing substance, consciousness, could interact with dead, inert matter. Scientifically, the idea of an unchanging self is a non-empirical and perhaps nonsensical notion: something without discernible causal relations to anything else cannot be measured and therefore is not only effectively unknowable, but has no conceivable role in causally explaining conscious processes.

What needs to be explained, rather, is how our sense of self, our indelible, ineradicable subjectivity, comes about. Some select readings on the lack of a central processor in the brain (Blackmore 2005: ch. 5, “The Self”), Dennett’s critique of the Cartesian Theatre (1991), Metzingers’s *Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self*,¹⁷ Bloom’s (2005) analyses of why we are innate essentialists, or Damasio’s (2000, 2010) analyses of the neurological basis for the development of proto-, core, and autobiographical selves persuasively present these points and generate interesting comparative discussion.

Many of these neuroscientists, however, seem to assume that the individual brain/mind is the proper level of investigation, an assumption that largely ignores the social dimension in the evolution, development, and moment-to-moment

functioning of human consciousness. This dimension is, however, treated by cognitive scientists such as Michael Tomasello, Terrence Deacon, and Andy Clark, who emphasize the role of language and culture in the evolution of human cognitive processes. Their perspectives readily complement this aspect of the Yogācārin cognitive model, the “common aspect of *ālaya-vijñāna*.”

In sum, both Yogācāra Buddhists and cognitive scientists not only consider our ordinary way of experiencing selves and objects as independent entities to be illusions, that is, as things that do not exist in the way they appear, they also see our experience of the twin reifications of subject and object as complex—and reciprocally correlated—cognitive constructions. In this view, inner self and external object are not two independent entities that happen to come together and produce perceptions, rather, they are seen as *two related aspects of a single, integral event*.¹⁸

At this point, students might more deeply appreciate why the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* reformulated the earlier Mahāyāna notion of emptiness, the idea that neither selves nor objects have any intrinsically existing, unchanging essence. It is no longer our inability to see the emptiness of things that is the core cognitive problem, as the Mādhyamikans argue. Rather, it is our inability to see the interdependent and constructed nature of apparently independent subjects and objects—that they are ultimately “just appearances”—that constitutes our deepest ignorance, our most fundamental cognitive fault. In Dennett’s terms, we are enchanted by the Cartesian theater of independent subjects acting upon independent external objects. In psychological (Bloom 2005) as well as Yogācāra terms, we are predisposed (*vāsanā*) to see the world in terms of the duality of grasper (*grāhaka*) and grasped (*grāhya*), subject and object, and thus disposed to act accordingly—as if an unchanging self could actually hold onto things in flux, a fistful of water or a lungful of air. Such illusions not only obscure our understanding of the complex cognitive processes by means of which we experience the world in dualistic terms, but they also trap us in the futile attempt to apprehend one side of the pair without the other, as if we actually could exist independently of an environment or objectively know that environment independently of our engagement with it.



The Transformative Process: The Three Natures

Lest we despair of being endlessly ensnared in webs of our own construction,¹⁹ the Yogācārins at least—unlike most cognitive scientists—stress the possibility of freedom from such fabrications. This is expressed in the idea of Three Natures (*trisvabhāva*), in effect, three distinctive orientations. We are ordinarily

fooled by the false appearances of what we imagine are independently existing entities (*parikalpita-svabhāva*, “imagined nature”). These appearances, though false, nevertheless arise in dependence on specific mental processes (*paratantra-svabhāva*, “dependent nature”)—and in this strict sense they exist and are “real,” that is, effective. But when one ultimately sees them as they “truly are” (*pariniṣpannā-svabhāva*, “perfected nature”), then one is freed from bondage to mere appearances.

The easiest way to explain this is by drawing on one of the traditional analogies, such as a mirage.²⁰ Most of us have experienced a mirage at one time or another, like the appearance of water above a hot stretch of highway. But the appearance is quite misleading: there is no water floating in the sky above the highway, we cannot touch it and it will not quench our thirst. The hot air rising from the surface of the highway refracts the light so that the shimmering surface of the pavement appears to be water floating in the sky. It is thus “real” insofar as we can all see and talk about it; it has a common, consensual reality, dependent upon our common cognitive faculties. These are the first two “natures”: the Imagined Nature is the false appearance of what is not actually there (*abhūta-parikalpita*), but this appearance occurs in dependence on certain specific causes and conditions (i.e., its Dependent Nature), and it has certain, specific effects, that is, the mirage we all see. And we can understand the causes of a mirage and no longer be enthralled by its appearance, no longer imagine that, despite its appearance, there really is water floating in the sky. We can, therefore, understand its final or Perfected Nature, understanding the real causes and conditions of appearances without imagining that they are something that truly exists. The Perfected Nature is the Dependent Nature without the Imagined Nature.

Yogācārins outlined the progressive stages (*bodhisattva-bhūmi*) along this path of realization as well as systematized the fruits of such realization in terms of three distinct dimensions of a Buddha (*trikāya*, “Three Bodies”). I have not found a way to compare these topics with cognitive science as usefully as comparison with the cognitive models discussed earlier and therefore am not discussing them here.



Conclusion

Teaching Yogācāra Buddhist thought is indeed challenging. Yogācāra appeared nearly a thousand years after the Buddha, during the highly developed Gupta era, the “golden age” of classical Indian civilization. Remarkably, it displays a level of conceptual sophistication and historically self-reflective

awareness—incorporating multiple layers of reinterpreted Buddhist doctrines—that finds rough parallels in our modern era. Its method of analysis—searching for impersonal patterns of interaction—has parallels in the basic scientific concern with causality. And many of its main ideas adumbrate those only recently developed by cognitive science itself. So it is hardly surprising that scholars have taken so long to adequately interpret such a complex set of ideas. But finally and fortunately we are now in a position to more fully appreciate Yogācāra than ever before, which is made possible through the mediating graces, as it were, of cognitive science. For to see past the content of our imaginative constructions and to fully understand the causal conditions by which such constructions arise, perhaps even to be liberated from them, we need to think both Buddhistically and scientifically.

Notes

1. For a short exercise on this, see Waldron 2002b.
2. “The Blessed One has designed (the teaching) that the marks of all things are essentially a no-essence in reference to the basic modality of clinging to marks imagined through discrimination, which in its basic modality clings to imagined descriptions” (Keenan 1997: 29n69).
3. Blackmore 2005: 50–65, “A Grand Illusion.”
4. Biological philosophers Maturana and Varela therefore conclude that “the domain . . . of interactions into which an organism can enter constitutes its entire cognitive reality” (Maturana and Varela 1980: 10).
5. Waldron 2011a: 5; *Yogācarabhūmi*, D.4038.5a4–6, (3,b) B.1.
6. The presentation in this section has been ordered inductively, asking how present conditions came to be from past causes. But this could just as easily be presented in the opposite order, starting from evolution and working toward our present, fully developed cognitive capacities.
7. “The eye . . . The ear . . . The nose . . . The tongue . . . The body . . . The mind is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world. That in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world—this is called the world in the Noble One’s terms (S IV 95). We have altered the translation of *vinaya* from ‘Discipline’ to ‘terms,’ consistent with one of its core meanings (PED, 623). A similar passage states (SN 169): ‘the world (*loka*) has arisen through the six [sense-modalities, including mind], it is made known through the six’” (Waldron 2002a: 46n137).
8. *Abhidharma-kosha* ad. IV 1.a. “The world in its variety arises from the action (*karma*) of beings” (Waldron 2002a: 45n133).
9. *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* I.60; Waldron 2002a: 45.

10. “Brain-language co-evolution has significantly restructured cognition from the top-down,” Deacon argues, such that “its secondary effects have also ramified to influence the whole of human cognition. . . . even when our symbolic-linguistic abilities are uninvolved” (1997: 417).
11. Waldron 2002a: 39.
12. “The uniquely human forms of thinking. . . . do not just depend on, but in fact derive from, perhaps even are constituted by, the interactive discourse that takes place through the medium of intersubjective and perspectival linguistic symbols, constructions, and discourse patterns” (Tomasello 2000: 215). By having acquired language, “the language user partitions her world into discrete units of particular kinds” (150), that is, into “the categories and perspectives and relational analogies embodied in that language” (189).
13. “In order to speak a language like Guugu Yimithirr, you need to know where the cardinal directions are at each and every moment of your waking life. You need to have a compass in your mind that operates all the time, day and night, without lunch breaks or weekends off, since otherwise you would not be able to impart the most basic information or understand what people around you are saying. Indeed, speakers of geographic languages seem to have an almost-superhuman sense of orientation. Regardless of visibility conditions, regardless of whether they are in thick forest or on an open plain, whether outside or indoors or even in caves, whether stationary or moving, they have a spot-on sense of direction. They don’t look at the sun and pause for a moment of calculation before they say, “There’s an ant just north of your foot.” They simply feel where north, south, west and east are, just as people with perfect pitch feel what each note is without having to calculate intervals” (Deutscher 2010).
14. “We all grow up,” according to Lakoff and Johnson, “with a view of our inner lives that is mostly unconscious, [and] used every day of our lives in our self-understanding” (1999: 268). But this view of self, they continue, is “both internally inconsistent and incompatible with what we have learned from the scientific study of the mind.”
15. Language evolved, neurophysiologist Terrence Deacon observes, “neither inside nor outside brains, but at the interface where cultural evolutionary processes affect biological evolutionary processes” (1997: 409f).
16. Deacon 1997: 452.
17. “Contrary to what most people believe, nobody has ever *been* or *had* a self. But it is not just that the modern philosophy of mind and cognitive neuroscience together are about to shatter the myth of the self. It has now become clear that we will never solve the philosophical puzzle of consciousness. . . . if we don’t come to terms with this simple proposition: that to the best of our current knowledge there is no thing, no indivisible entity, that is *us*, neither in the brain nor in some metaphysical realm beyond this world” (Metzinger 2009: 1).

18. “The subjective and objective aspects of concepts and categories arise together as different poles of the same act of cognition and are part of the same informational field” (Rosch 1999: 72). “The relationship between object and organism—has two clear consequences . . . (1) the feeling essence of our sense of self . . . (2) the enhancement of the image of the causative object . . . the object is *set out*. . . It becomes *fact*” (Damasio 2000: 171). Cognitive scientist, J. J. Gibson, in a tome tellingly entitled, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1979: 116), similarly observes that “to perceive the world is to coperceive oneself. . . The optical information to specify the self. . . accompanies the optical information to specify the environment. . . The one could not exist without the other. . . The supposedly separate realms of the subjective and the objective are actually only poles of attention. The dualism of observer and environment is unnecessary” (cited in Rosch 1999: 71).
19. Deacon 1997: 436.
20. Westerhoff 2010: 56–68.

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Teaching Tantric Buddhism in an Undergraduate Classroom Context

David B. Gray

Introduction

The literature and practices of tantric Buddhist traditions are aspects of Buddhism that, until recently, have largely been ignored by European and American scholars of Buddhism. This is because, as Gregory Schopen has argued in a 1991 article, the field of Buddhist studies in the West was deeply afflicted with what he termed “Protestant presuppositions,” privileging textual study over the study of practice or material culture. Donald Lopez (1998: 161) has argued that this has also led to a prejudice for the study of the “belief” or early or “original” Buddhism, which led scholars to focus on the study of works of early Buddhist scripture and works of Buddhist philosophy. The Tantric traditions developed relatively late in the history of Buddhism, and the copious literature that these traditions produced was primarily focused on ritual and meditative practices rather than philosophy. Partly for these reasons, these traditions were largely ignored and deemed “degenerate” or even non-Buddhist (Lopez 1995: 262).

Over the past fifty years attitudes toward tantric Buddhist traditions have shifted in the West, and this has led to the rapid development of this field. This change was triggered in part by the emigration of Tibetans from Chinese-controlled Tibet during the 1960s, in response to the Dalai Lama’s flight into exile in 1959, the terrible famine that resulted from the failed “Great Leap Forward” policies in the early 1960s, and the destructive Great Cultural Revolution that followed it.¹ The flight of Tibetan lamas into exile coincided with the increase in popular interest in the West in “Eastern Religions,” which

led to the rapid growth of Tibetan Buddhist centers throughout the world as well as increasing interest, both popular and academic, in the traditions of tantric practice that the Tibetans brought with them into diaspora.

Over the past few decades, there has been tremendous growth in the publication of studies shedding light on the history of tantric traditions as well as the translation of key works. Although much more work needs to be done, there is now an abundance of works that could be included in an undergraduate course on the tantric Buddhist traditions.



Defining the Tantric Traditions

The Tantric Buddhist traditions have been given several labels, but there is no single label that is accepted by all of these traditions. The adjective *tantric*, an English word derived from the Sanskrit *tāntrika*, means simply that which relates to the *tantras*, the genre of scripture which serves as the canonical source texts for the various traditions of tantric practice. Tantras are works that primarily focus on ritual and meditative practices, so the term *tantric* also envelopes the practices associated with these scriptures, and were traditionally disseminated by the *tāntrikas* (the Sanskrit term also designates tantric practitioners), along with the texts (see Padoux 2002). So “tantric traditions” are the communities of practitioners who practice, preserve, and transmit through both time and space both the texts and the practices that are traditionally associated with them.

It is important to note the use of this term in a plural form. Tantric or esoteric Buddhist traditions are multiple and also originated as multiple, distinct traditions of both text and practice. Indeed, one of the most important tropes in the history of the dissemination of tantric traditions is that of lineage, the transmission of teachings along an uninterrupted lineage, from master to disciple, the so-called *guruparamparā*. Lineage must be distinguished from institutionalized sectarian traditions, as they are often preserved by multiple sects, which typically make claims with respect to lineage to bolster their authority.² This focus on lineage is found throughout the tantric Buddhist world; originating in India, this emphasis was transmitted to Tibet and East Asia, and remains an important concern of contemporary tantric communities.

Eventually, circa the tenth century, advocates of these traditions developed broad rubrics to conceptualize the movement as a whole. These include the well-known South Asian formulation of the Vajrayāna, or “Adamantine Vehicle,” as well as the East Asian formulation of “Esoteric Teaching” (Chin. *mi-jiao* 密教, Jp. *mikkyō*), both of which appear to have come into common use circa the tenth century, relatively late in the history of these traditions.³ Broad

rubrics, such as “Tantric Buddhism,” Vajrayāna, and Esoteric Teaching, are abstractions that have no basis in how actual tantric traditions are organized and practiced. And since there is no term for the tantric traditions as a whole that is universally accepted by all of them, I prefer using the term “tantric traditions,” since the terms *tantra* and *tantric* are emic terms that are nonetheless well known in Western academic circles, despite their shortcomings.⁴



The Origins of the Tantric Traditions

The tantric traditions emerged in India circa the mid-first millennium c.e. The origins of tantric traditions are unclear, but it appears that distinctly tantric forms of Hinduism emerged first among unorthodox Śaiva Hindu traditions circa the fifth to six centuries c.e. Thence, it spread to other Hindu traditions, as well as to Buddhism; distinctly tantric forms of Buddhism emerged during the seventh century.

Of the biggest influences on tantric traditions was the far older Vedic tradition of Hinduism. Vedic Hinduism featured the priestly class, Brahmins, who had the sacred duty to memorize the oral sacred literature of the tradition, the *Vedas*, and also learn the complex ritual practices the tradition advocated. These rituals for the gods focused on throwing offerings into a sacred fire, which ranged from largely vegetarian offerings at the small domestic fires (*grhya*) that householders maintained to the larger “solemn” (*shrauta*) rites that required animal sacrifices. This tradition developed circa 150–500 B.C.E., reaching its peak right around 500 B.C.E., just prior to rise of the renunciant traditions that would challenge it. Although there was tension between advocates of the Vedic tradition and advocates of some of the tantric traditions, the tantric traditions drew heavily from Vedic ritual practice traditions nonetheless. This borrowing includes whole adaptation of the key Vedic rite of fire sacrifice, *homa*,⁵ and the transformation of the Vedic rite of royal consecration, *rājyasūya*, into the tantric rite of initiation qua “consecration,” *abhiṣeka* (Davidson 2002: 124). Even the distinctly tantric practice of visualizing oneself as a deity had Vedic precursors. As Vrajavallabha Dvivedi has shown in his (1992) article, some Vedic rites required ritual identification with the deity, via both inner visualization and outer ritual actions.

One of the key factors leading to the emergence of the tantric traditions was the rise of the world-renouncing *śramaṇa* movement a thousand years earlier circa the mid-first millennium B.C.E. This movement, which started within Hinduism but led to the development of rival traditions, namely Buddhism

and Jainism, was characterized by its highlighting of the goal of liberation (*mokṣa*) from cyclic existence (*saṃsāra*) as the key religious goal, as well as the articulation of distinct paths of practice for reaching this goal. These include, most notably, renunciation and asceticism as a key requisite for liberation. As we will discuss later, the tantric Buddhist traditions exhibit considerable tension regarding the need for renunciation on the path to awakening. Buddhist and Hindu *śramaṇa* traditions held that liberation resulted from a process of “awakening” (*bodhi*) in which the practitioner achieves a special knowledge or gnosis (*jñāna*) that liberates one from the cycle of awakening. The practice of meditation and yoga were seen as key practices to develop this realization. Tantric Buddhist traditions inherited this assumption, and many of the contemplative practices, from earlier Buddhist and non-Buddhist renunciant traditions.

The *śramaṇa* movement as a whole also gave rise to a powerful critique of the Vedic Hindu tradition, challenging it on ethical grounds as well as with respect to the efficacy of its complex ritual traditions. The late centuries B.C.E. and the early centuries C.E. saw the rise of the *śramaṇa* traditions, most notably Buddhism and Jainism, and the concomitant decline of the older Vedic ritual tradition. It arguably led as well to the transformation of Hinduism during this period, leading to the rise of the devotional movements in Hinduism during the first millennium C.E., as well as creating the vacuum that led to the rise of the tantric traditions, since the tantric priests came to fill the role of ritual masters formerly held by Vedic Brahmins.⁶

Another influence on the tantric traditions was the rise of the Bhakti devotional movement in Hinduism, which was characterized by a tendency toward monotheism, in that devotion to a single supreme creator god was seen as the key to salvation. This tendency is ancient in Hinduism and is very clear in some of the later *Upaniṣads* dating to the second half of the first millennium B.C.E. (Flood 1996: 153). Relatively early works such as the *Bhagavad Gīta*, estimated to date circa 100 C.E. (Miller 1986: 3), call for devotion to God as the supreme path to liberation. This work also contains a subtle critique of the older renunciant schools, portraying them as difficult and somewhat hidebound, advocating instead the “easy” path of devotion that can be followed by anyone, and most particularly by the laity.⁷ The devotional movement in Hinduism originated in South India during the mid-first millennium C.E., right around the time that the earliest Hindu tantric traditions were developing. Devotional Hinduism presented a tremendous challenge to South Asian Buddhist traditions. As Galen Amstutz suggested, the bhakti movements were much better suited to the increasingly decentralized Indian polities of this time period, and, by contrast, “Buddhism had no means of responding

to later premodern Indian society's increasing need for social authority and caste articulation which was as effectively synthetic as bhakti." He qualifies this claim, however, with the recognition that "Buddhism's strongest gambit was the tantric guru-based traditions" (1998: 85). Devotion to God is a central feature of most Hindu tantric traditions (Padoux 2002: 20). In Buddhist tantric traditions, devotion is typically directed toward the guru rather than one's meditation deity. This is a point illustrated in the biography of the Tibetan scholar-saint Marpa "The Translator" (1012–1097), who journeyed to India and studied with the great saint Nāropa. At one point in his training, his biography reports that Nāropa magically generated an image of Marpa's meditation deity, Hevajra, and asked Marpa to whom he should bow down, Hevajra or himself. Marpa, by bowing down to Hevajra, failed the test, not realizing that he was granted this vision only by the grace of his guru (Gtsansmyon He-ru-ka 1982: 92–93).

Buddhist tantric traditions were somewhat equivocal concerning the need for renunciation. Generally they seem to have followed the lead of the bhakti tradition in rejecting renunciation, either implicitly or explicitly. A number of Buddhist tantras contain explicit rejections of asceticism,⁸ and call instead for what one might term a "worldly" lifestyle involving indulgence in meat, alcohol, and sex (Gray 2011a, 2011b, 2013). There were in fact debates in Indian Buddhist circles regarding whether tantric practice is suitable for monks (Gray 2007: 103–131; Szántó 2010). Interestingly, among the Buddhist tantric traditions only the Tibetans and Tibetan-inspired traditions have maintained the institutions of celibate monasticism, and several Tibetan traditions also maintain lineages of lay tantric practitioners (Samuel 1993: 274–280).

Tantric practices appear to have first emerged among unorthodox Śaiva groups, whose development implies weakness among the orthodox practitioners of Vedic traditions who, presumably, would have sought to obstruct their activities had they the wherewithal to do so (Sanderson 2009: 41). As I will discuss in the next section, the emergence of tantric Buddhist traditions can be dated quite precisely to the mid-seventh century C.E. It appears, however, that some tantric Hindu traditions emerged at least a century or two earlier, circa the fifth or sixth century C.E. Very little is known about this early period, from which there is a paucity of textual, epigraphic, and art historical evidence. Circa the seventh century, there is considerably more evidence for Hindu tantric traditions as well (Sanderson 2001: 2–14; Lorenzen 2002: 26–27). The priority of Hindu tantric traditions is also implied by the considerable evidence of Hindu influence on Buddhist tantric traditions, a topic which Alexis Sanderson (2001, 2009) has explored in depth.

Overview of the History of Tantric Buddhist Traditions

While there are many lacunae in our understanding of the early history of tantric Buddhist traditions, available evidence points to the mid-seventh century as the most likely point at which historically datable traditions began to take shape. The earliest known datable tantric text is the *Awakening of Mahāvairocana Tantra* (*mahāvairocanābhisambodhi-tantra*), which was composed circa the mid-seventh century and was reported to be one of the texts collected by the Chinese pilgrim Wu-xing (無行) circa 680 C.E. (Hodge 2003: 14–15). Wu-xing also commented on the emergence of a new “teaching about mantra” (真言教法), which was very popular during his time in India (Davidson 2002: 118).

There was rapid growth and dissemination of the newly emerging tantric Buddhist traditions. Within a few decades after their initial composition early tantric traditions of text and practice were disseminated to East and Southeast Asia. This was facilitated by the active trade and diplomatic exchanges between India and China during the seventh and early eighth centuries, via overland trade routes through Central Asia and also maritime trade routes by way of Southeast Asia (Sen 2003: 16, 203–211). Likewise, there is evidence that the Sarvadurgatipariśodhana and Trilokavijāya *maṇḍalas*, and, presumably, their associated practice and textual traditions, were introduced to Java circa 700 C.E. (Nihom 1998: 251). Moreover, the Central Asian monk Amoghavajra, who journeyed from China to India and back via the maritime route during the mid-eighth century, reported that there was a new canon of eighteen tantras, which he attempted to convey back to China, and partially translated into Chinese.⁹ This suggests that there was a very rapid production of new tantric texts and practice traditions circa the mid-seventh through mid-eighth centuries.

Tantric traditions were established in China during the Tang dynasty, and thence disseminated to Korea (Sørensen 2011: 575–596) and Japan.¹⁰ While the institutionalized esoteric Buddhist school did not survive the Wuzong emperor’s (武宗; 814–846, r. 840–846) infamous persecution of Buddhism in the mid-ninth century, esoteric Buddhist traditions survived in peripheral areas in China, and many elements of esoteric Buddhist practice were taken up by the “mainstream” non-esoteric traditions as well as by Daoist traditions.¹¹

Tibetan Buddhist tradition views the seventh century as the time when Buddhism first reached Tibet, although there might have been gradual dissemination of Buddhism into the region earlier. Both the development of the

Tibetan script and the first Tibetan translations of Buddhist Sanskrit texts are traditionally attributed to Thon-mi Sambhoṭa, who was sent to India for these purposes by the great king Srong-btsan-sgam-po (617–649 C.E.) (Skilling 1997: 87–89). The translation of Buddhist scriptures began, apparently, during the late seventh century and continued with imperial support during the eighth and ninth centuries, with most of the “early” translations made between 779 and 838 C.E. (Herrmann-Pfandt 2002: 132). As evidenced by imperial catalogues compiled during this period, as well as tantric manuscripts preserved at Dunhuang, all of which predate the second or “latter transmission” of Buddhism to Tibet that commenced in the late tenth century,¹² a significant amount of tantric scriptures and ritual texts were translated into Tibetan during the imperial period.¹³ This translation activity ceased with the collapse of the Tibetan empire in 841 C.E., but resumed in the late tenth century, when King Lha-bla-ma Ye-shes-'od reportedly sent twenty-one novice monks to Kashmir to receive further training. One of them, Rin-chen bZang-po (958–1055 C.E.), became a renowned translator, thus initiating the second or “Later Transmission” (*phyi dar*) of Buddhism to Tibet.¹⁴

Tibetan Buddhists would later play important roles in the dissemination of Buddhism (and associated tantric traditions) to China and Mongolia, and eventually throughout the world, with the diaspora of Tibetan lamas in the twentieth century following the Chinese invasion and occupation of Tibet in 1950.



Teaching Tantric Buddhism: An Advanced Seminar

A course on tantric Buddhism would ideally be taught as an upper-level seminar, for advanced undergraduate students who have already received an introduction to religious studies methodologies. Ideally, students who take this course would have already taken an “Introduction to Buddhism” course as a prerequisite for this class. However, students with experience studying religion but who have little exposure to Buddhism could take this course provided that they are willing to do some additional reading. For the sake of such students I have included relevant background readings in the list of recommended readings recommended for each week.

I conduct this seminar as a guided introduction to graduate-level work in religious studies. The course is structured around a series of assignments that culminates in the completion of a research paper. Each student is also responsible for initiating the class discussion with a formal class presentation on the

topic of the week's discussion. The recommended reading list for each week includes additional readings on the subject to aid the student presenter(s).

The course is designed for a fourteen-week semester and is broken down into seven two-week units. The course will open in the initial two weeks with consideration of the definitions of "tantra" and "tantricism," and then will segue to a short work on tantra composed by a Tibetan lama for a contemporary American audience. This will be followed by six two-week units on various aspects of tantric history, literature, and practice.

The first, unit two, will focus on the early history of tantric Buddhism in India. It entails a reading of Ronald Davidson's (2002) book, which is particularly challenging for undergraduate students in my experience. Nonetheless, it is an important work that has no alternative, aside from David Snellgrove's somewhat outdated (1987) *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*. I would recommend including this work if one's aim is to simulate a graduate seminar. However, when teaching this in a ten-week quarter at my university, this is one of the units I drop, and I instead summarize the early history of Indian tantric Buddhism in the initial two weeks of class.

This is followed by two units on tantric ritual practices and visualization. The first, unit three, focuses on Koichi Shinohara's recent (2014) groundbreaking work on the development of tantric ritual practices, as well as the incorporation of visualization into these practices, in India, via careful study of Chinese translations of early esoteric Buddhist ritual manuals. The second, unit four, features Richard Kohn's masterful study of the Mani Rimdu festival in Nepal. Here I strongly recommend first introducing the festival to students in week seven, followed by a viewing of Kohn's (2006) film, *The Secret World of a Tibetan Lama*. In my experience, viewing the film's depiction of the rituals helps students understand Kohn's written descriptions of them during week eight.

Unit five focuses on Sera Khandro (1892–1940), a renowned Tibetan lay female practitioner who wrote both an autobiography as well as a biography of her male partner Drimé Özer and is the focus of Sarah Jacoby's recent (2014) book. The work explores the status of female tantric practitioners in Tibet as well as the strategies they have taken to negotiate the obstacles presented by androcentric traditions. It also sheds light on the fascinating but poorly understood sexual practices preserved in some tantric Buddhist traditions.

Units five and six focus on the Shingon tradition of Japan. The first unit is dedicated to the study of the founder of this tradition, Kūkai. In a graduate course I would strongly recommend using Ryūichi Abé's masterful study of Kūkai and his work, *The Weaving of Mantra* (1999). However, I find that

Hakeda's (1972) shorter and less complex presentation of Kūkai's life and his solid translations of his works are more approachable for undergraduates. The course will conclude with Mark Unno's (2004) study of the Shingon contemplative practices associated with the Mantra of Light.

The structure of this course is easily adaptable for faculty teaching courses of different lengths. Faculty teaching a twelve-week semester course could simply delete one of the units. Those who teach the ten-week courses under the quarter system, as I do, could delete two of them. As noted above, for an undergraduate course I would be inclined to delete unit two and summarize Indian tantric history during unit one. I would then delete unit six, covering the early history of the Shingon tradition while introducing Unno's book.



Seminar: Tantric Buddhism

This course will involve a detailed study of Tantric Buddhist traditions. We will explore a range of South and East Asian tantric Buddhist traditions—both the narrative traditions associated with the masters of these traditions as well as studies of tantric Buddhist ritual and meditative practices. We will also explore the experience of female practitioners in one of these traditions. As an upper-level seminar, this course will require regular advance preparation of the readings and active participation in the discussions of them in class. Students will be expected to read, reread, and take detailed notes on a short reading for the week. Each student will also be expected to lead the class discussion for one of the classes; this will require additional preparation of recommended background readings. Discussion notes will be submitted at the end of each class. Each student will also be responsible to lead the discussion for one class. The course will culminate in the submission of a research paper (3,000–6,000 words, worth 60% of the grade). In preparation for this assignment, each student will submit a 150–200 word abstract and bibliography (10%), and a 1,500–2,000 word draft paper (20%). Class participation will account for the remaining 10% of the grade; this will be evaluated on the basis of class participation and preparation as indicated by the weekly submission of notes on the readings, as well as the quality of the class discussion leadership.

Seminar Syllabus

Required Books (available for purchase in the bookstore)

Ronald M. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

Yoshito S. Hakeda, *Kūkai: Major Works* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972).

Sarah H. Jacoby, *Love and Liberation: Autobiographical Writings of the Tibetan Buddhist Visionary Sera Khandro* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

Richard J. Kohn, *Lord of the Dance: The Mani Rimdu Festival in Tibet and Nepal* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

Koichi Shinohara. *Spells, Images, and Maṇḍalas: Tracing the Evolution of Esoteric Buddhist Rituals* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

Mark Unno, *Shingon Refractions: Myōe and the Mantra of Light* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2004).

Lama Yeshe, *Introduction to Tantra: The Transformation of Desire* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2001).

On Library Reserve:

Donald Mitchell and Sarah Jacoby, (IBE) *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Standard Library Reference Works:

Encyclopedia of Religion, edited by Lindsay Jones (2005).

Encyclopedia of Buddhism, edited by Robert E. Buswell, Jr. (2004).

Weekly Course Meetings and Assignments

Unit One: Introductions

Week One—What Is Tantric Buddhism?

Read: Ronald Davidson, “Vajrayāna”

André Padoux, “What Do We Mean by Tantrism?”

Rec: IBE 6–63, 115–175

Week Two—Tantra, An Insider’s Perspective

Read: Lama Yeshe, 1–141

Rec: IBE 177–187

Unit Two: Indian Tantric Buddhism

Week Three—The Development of Indian Tantric Buddhist Traditions

Read: Davidson (IEB), 1–168

Week Four—The Siddhas: Saints in Tantric Buddhist Traditions

Read: Ronald Davidson (IEB), 169–339

Unit Three: The Evolution of Indian Tantric Buddhist Ritual

Week Five—Early Esoteric Buddhist Ritual Practices

Read: Shinohara, 1–88

Rec: Yukei Matsunaga, “A History of Tantric Buddhism in India with Reference to Chinese Translations”

•Abstract and Bibliography Due

Week Six—The Integration of Visualization Practice in Tantric Buddhist Rituals

Read: Shinohara, 89–204

Rec: Matthew Kapstein, “Scholastic Buddhism and the Mantrayāna”¹⁵

Unit Four: Mani Rimdu: An Exploration of Tantric Ritual in Nepal

Week Seven—Introduction to Tantric Ritual Practices in Contemporary Nepal

Read: Kohn, 3–71

Film: Richard Kohn, *Destroyer of Illusion* (Festival Media 2006, 56 minutes)

Rec: IBE 188–211

Week Eight—In-depth Exploration of the Mani Rimdu Festival

Read: Kohn, 73–255

Rec: IBE 211–219

Unit Five: Autobiographical Writings of a Tibetan Female Practitioner

Week Nine—The Life of Sera Khandro

Read: Jacoby, 1–187

Rec: Reginald Ray, “Accomplished Women in Tantric Buddhism of Medieval India and Tibet”

Week Ten—Sacred Sexuality in Tibetan Buddhism

Read: Jacoby, 188–324

Rec: David Gray, “The Tantric Family Romance: Sex and the Construction of Social Identity in Tantric Buddhism”

•Draft Paper Due

Unit Six: Kūkai and the Establishment of the Shingon School in Japan

Week Eleven—Kūkai’s Life and Thought

Read: Hakeda, 13–100

Rec: IBE 309–321

Week Twelve—Kūkai's Major Works

Read: Hakeda, 101–275

Unit Seven: Myōe and the Mantra of Light

Week Thirteen—Contemplative Practices in Shingon Buddhism

Read: Mark Unno, *Shingon Refractions*, 1–149

Week Fourteen—Myōe's Mantra of Light Practice

Read: Mark Unno, *Shingon Refractions*, 153–289

Notes

1. For a summary of this history, see Kapstein 2006: 282–290.
2. Matthew Kapstein provided a very helpful definition of the terms “sect” and “lineage,” which are overlapping categories in Tibetan Buddhism and, arguably, other tantric traditions as well: “By *sect*, I mean a religious order that is distinguished from others by virtue of its institutional independence; that is, its unique character is embodied outwardly in the form of an independent hierarchy and administration, independent properties and a recognizable membership of some sort. A *lineage*, on the other hand is a continuous succession of spiritual teachers who have transmitted a given body knowledge over a period of generations but who need not be affiliated with a common sect” (Kapstein 1996: 284n2).
3. Regarding the development of the “Esoteric Teaching” designation, see Sharf 2002: 269. Regarding “Adamantine Vehicle,” the earliest reference I have been able to find in Sanskrit literature occurs in the *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha-nāma Mahāyāna-sūtra*, which interestingly retains an identity as a Māhāyāna *sūtra* while nevertheless advancing the cause of the newly conceived Adamantine Vehicle. The third section of this work contains the following verse: “Well spoken is this *sūtra*, which is the secret of all Tathāgatas, the unexcelled Adamantine Vehicle, and is the compendium of the Great Vehicle.” (My translation of the following Sanskrit text edited in Horiuchi 1974: 490: “*subhāṣitam idaṃ sūtram vajrayānam anuttaram / sarvatāthāgatam guhyam mahāyānābhisamgraham//*.” I am indebted to Christian Wedemeyer for bringing this text’s use of the term *vajrayāna* to my attention.) The dating of the *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha-nāma Mahāyāna-sūtra* is a complex problem. While early versions of this or closely related texts such as the *Vajrashekhara Tantra* were disseminated to East Asia during the eighth century, the texts in circulation at this time likely differed substantially from the Sanskrit texts preserved in Nepal centuries later, or the Tibetan translation made in the late

tenth century by Rin-chen-bzang-po and Shraddhākaravarma. The verses of this text containing the term *Vajrayāna* thus cannot be reliably dated earlier than the tenth century.

4. Were this course to address solely Indian and Tibetan traditions then the use of the term *Vajrayāna* would be ideal, since this term came into common use in these cultural spheres. However, it did not come into common use in East Asia, where expressions like “esoteric teachings” and “esoteric Buddhism” (密宗佛教) are more common. These terms, in turn, would be ideal for a course focusing solely on East Asia, but these expressions are not commonly used in Indian and Tibetan traditions, despite the importance of secrecy in these traditions. While the terms *tantra* and *tantric* derive from Sanskrit terms, it should be noted that they carry negative connotations. As Hugh Urban has shown in his book *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion* (2003), these terms have negative associations in both India and the West, being particularly associated with black magic in India and with sex in the West. However, these associations are not entirely unwarranted, as many of the tantras are replete with descriptions of both violent magical rituals as well as sexual practices.
5. Regarding this, see Payne 1991 and Payne and Orzech 2011.
6. Ronald Inden has discussed at length the ways in which classical Hinduism was dependent upon the rise of the *śramaṇa* traditions, most notably Buddhism, in a groundbreaking and still quite relevant (1979) article.
7. See the *Bhagavad-Gīta*, chs. 3–5; Miller 1986: 41–61; and Flood 1996: 126–127.
8. For examples of this sort of discourse, see Gray 2007: 285.
9. Regarding Amoghavajra and his attempt at transmitting this canon of tantric literature, see Giebel 1995 and Gray 2009: 12–13.
10. Regarding the establishment of the Shingon school of esoteric Buddhism and the addition of esoteric Buddhist practice to the Tendai school in Japan during the ninth century, see Abe 1999 and Groner 2000.
11. The impact of esoteric Buddhist in China is a major focus of Orzech, Sørensen, and Payne’s *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia*, see 421–574.
12. Regarding Dunhuang Tibetan tantric manuscripts, see Dalton and van Schaik 2006.
13. According to Tibetan historical sources, three catalogues of translated texts were made during the Tibetan imperial period. These include the *Lhan/lDan kar ma*, which has been dated to 812 C.E. (Herrmann-Pfandt 2002: 129), and the *Phang-thang-ma* has been dated to 842 C.E. (Dotson 2007: 4). The third catalogue, the *mchims phu ma*, is apparently lost.
14. See Ronald Davidson’s 2005 study of this era of Tibetan religious history.
15. This essay is contained in *Reason’s Traces* (Kapstein 2001: 233–255).

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Rethinking the Teaching of Zen Buddhism

Steven Heine

Introduction: The “String of Pearls” Fallacy

The image of Zen Buddhism portrayed in postwar writings by D. T. Suzuki and Alan Watts is still in many ways valuable for conveying the atmosphere of a sudden flash of intuitive illumination beyond reason, as expressed in an irreverent and frequently antinomian rhetorical style. But what is not tenable is their portrayal of Zen as a pristine mystical tradition founded on a timeless experience of universal oneness, one that has been seemingly unaffected by the vagaries of history or the discrepancies of society. Based on an insider approach to disseminating Zen narratives in classic Chinese Chan sources from the Song dynasty (960–1279), the Suzuki–Watts paradigm sees Zen as an uninterrupted series of transmissions from enlightened master to insightful disciple.

Because it seems to take literally the traditional self-characterization of Zen as a “special transmission outside the teachings” (*kyōge betsuden*), the Suzuki–Watts approach has been referred to as the “string of pearls” fallacy, which purports that Zen succeeded as an expanding religious movement because each successive generation produced its own charismatic master who inherited and in turn passed on the legacy with unique ingenuity (McRae 2003: 10). This view has been buttressed in the public imagination by a number of contemporary, non-academic works that continue to gain great popularity, ranging from Eugen Herrigel’s *Zen and the Art of Archery*, a personal account of his studies in Japan in the 1920s, which creates a misleading image of Zen’s relation to the martial arts, to Robert Pirsig’s bestselling novel *Zen and the Art*

of *Motorcycle Maintenance*, which disclaims any connection to historical Zen yet reinforces the traditional paradigm favoring timeless image over on-the-ground reality.¹

If the teaching of Zen is based exclusively on this perspective, it can be modified and adjusted through incorporating important new scholarship produced during the past several decades on both sides of the Pacific. These studies have significantly challenged the idealized image by stressing the diverse ways that Zen has been a living tradition and constitutes a cultural product that is reflective of the variability and varieties of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese societies. First were the historical works of Yanagida Seizan, especially *Shoki Zenshūshi no kenkyū* (Studies of the historical writings of the early Chan school) published in 1967, which were based in large part on the discovery of long-lost manuscripts at the Silk Road caves of Dunhuang. His scholarship revealed the complexity of the school's formation and showed that "the early history of the Chan movement has been rewritten" (Welter 2006: 4). The same year, Philip Yampolsky's bilingual translation and historical examination of the Dunhuang version of sixth patriarch Huineng's text the *Platform Sutra* helped to clarify the development of Chinese Chan, which took hold in the eighth century and spread as a major or even dominant religious movement in subsequent periods.

Since the publication of seminal studies by Yampolsky (1967) and Yanagida (1967), and even though the latter's own work has been called into question in some quarters for romanticizing the tradition (Poceski 2007), a couple of generations of scholars who trained under these giants or their colleagues have authored major and at times devastating critiques of the Suzuki-Watts paradigm. Historical criticism has undermined the traditional narrative's presumptions of ahistoricity reflecting uncorrupted spiritual purity by showing that the complexity of human agency conditions the production of moments of insight. This criticism has also disproved assertions of ethnic exceptionalism or reverse Orientalist claims that only Asians can grasp the essence of Zen.

Newer studies show that the overall effect of the idealization of Zen has been to cloak and conceal concrete political agendas that its early leaders adopted when the tradition first came to the forefront in the highly competitive religious environment in China and Japan. At times, the secular authorities forged alliances with or had a special preference for other sects of Buddhism, as well as forms of Confucianism, Daoism, or Shinto. A main factor enabling Chan to expand rapidly during the Song dynasty was that the school created a religious ancestral lineage system that emulated the Confucian family system. Chan also became associated or identified with "public" monasteries, which received significant government support in contrast to private temples, although the

downside of this system was that a Chan master was typically moved from abbacy to abbacy throughout his career at the will of the politically powerful.

Therefore, Zen's ability to struggle, survive, and often thrive may have been the result of, or conversely led to, compromises with its fundamental principles, a phenomenon that is perhaps unsurprising when one considers the extent of hypocrisy and corruption that has shaped the history of religions worldwide.² However, it is important in the teaching of Zen not to tend toward an extreme form of criticism that tends to throw the baby out with the bathwater, so to speak, by failing to recognize and give credit to what is of enduring spiritual and social value in the tradition.

Revisionist Historical Accounts

Recent academic studies have shaped a revisionist approach to understanding and instructing the historicity and thought of Zen in terms of the following five categories:

1. Historicism. As opposed to seeing Zen as an eternal philosophy in which there was a string of pearls transmission from one enlightened master in each generation to the next, a critical approach shows that debates and conflicts along with the suppression of dissenting voices have characterized the history of Zen from the time of the Northern school that was overtaken by the Southern school in Tang dynasty (618–907) China, right through to the modern periods in Japan.

2. Monasticism. While Zen writings highlight the role of spontaneous and often blasphemous utterances of the patriarchs, recent works demonstrate that Zen has always been a highly structured and hierarchical monastic tradition that emphasizes rules consistent with earlier Buddhist institutions, whether or not these are actually followed in real life.

3. Ritualism. Although Zen is most famous for the practices of zazen, or sitting meditation as a form of contemplation, and kōans, or paradoxical riddles that display irrationality and irreverence, scholarship indicates that in China, and especially in Japan, Zen temples often integrated into the structure of temple life the local folk beliefs in indigenous gods and assimilated ritual practices for healing or other this-worldly benefits.

4. Culturalism. Zen proclaims universality but in fact very much reflects the ways that East Asian society tends to foster class and gender inequalities, so

that outsiders, including the outcast community, have often received unfair and discriminatory treatment by Zen institutions, which has also claimed to be exceptional and exempt from scrutiny and critique.

5. Nationalism. Despite the appearance of an aloof and reclusive mysticism, leading figures of Zen have not been immune to the pressures of political forces, and in numerous well-documented cases have participated either reluctantly or with great enthusiasm in the growth of twentieth-century Japanese militarism and imperialism, while also failing to recant and repent following the debacle of World War II. We can now examine each in greater specificity for insight about the nature of Zen tradition in practice.



Historicism

The traditional narrative portrays Zen's claims of immediacy and universality as ideals that transcend any particular historical context yet remain relevant and timely for all periods of history in every society (Sharf 1995: 107–150). At the same time, Suzuki, who was not an ordained priest, argued that Zen can only be truly understood by Asians and he even criticized Watts for his apparent lack of a genuine spiritual experience. However, historical studies by a wide range of scholars have shown that the formation of Chinese Chan emerged from a kind of tug of war between various competing factions, including the Northern school, which was strong in the early Tang dynasty (618–907), in addition to the Southern school, which eventually prevailed and became the mainstream (McRae 1986; Faure 1997). A number of the accounts of leading figures from the formative period, including Bodhidharma (whose name is not mentioned as the first patriarch in some of the earliest transmission narratives) and Huineng (who some claim was a figurehead more or less invented by the evangelical drive of follower Shenhui) were romanticized almost beyond recognition.

Furthermore, scholarship shows that after harsh sanctions against Buddhism at the end of the Tang dynasty, and with challenges to its institutional strength still to come in the highly contested religious environment of the Song dynasty that was dominated by Neo-Confucianism, Zen nevertheless by the beginning of the eleventh century became a leading religious school with strong ties to secular leaders and associations with the government. In fact, political figures were often among the elite scholar-officials who were very much involved in commissioning or editing many of the Zen transmission narratives. This was all part of the deliberate transition made by the government from China as a society based on *wu* or martial arts to one based on *wen* or a literary approach. In

this transformative context, “Under the aura of Chan, illustrious literati, some of whom were among the highest representatives of government, sought to further the interests of Chan by promoting its teachings as an instrument of state ideology” (Welter 2006: 6). Furthermore, “political, social, and economic factors of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries had a decisive impact on the development of Chinese Chan Buddhism, without which there could have been no Zen in East Asia as we now know it” (Schlüter 2008: 175).

Supposedly free of reliance on text and doctrine, Chan claimed to promote spontaneity and ingenuity, especially through poetic expressions that appealed to Song scholar-officials. However, Chan stories were intended not so much in order to awaken an individual practitioner as to pass control from one leader of a monastery to another based largely on connections with lay supporters. Thus, the Chan movement thrived because it maintained an active engagement with the literati who were the leaders of society.

For example, the Yunmen and Fayan factions of the tenth century remained very strong in the early eleventh century when a new wave of transmission narratives was created that celebrated a multi-branched approach to embracing the various Chan schools. However, by the middle part of the century the Linji (Jp. Rinzai) school had become the principal sect, reflecting a tendency to reduce Chan to a single major lineage. This outlook was promoted by the official Yang Yi, based on a personal motivation for determining which form of Chan best suited the interests of the Song dynasty.

In addition, the heated dispute in the twelfth century regarding the alternative practices of Koan Introspection endorsed by the Linji school or Silent Illumination promoted by the Caodong (Jp. Soto) school was greatly affected by political rivalries in the later Song dynasty. Both parties were anxious to prove their authenticity in the face of “confiscations of monastery lands, the restrictions on ordination, and the diminishing number of monastery conversions, together with the persecution that Buddhism underwent” (Schlüter 2008: 52). This schism broke the code of harmony that the Chan schools had maintained, and the exclusivist sectarian stance has often been adopted uncritically by contemporary instructors who portray one approach as representing separate doctrinal truths rather than different viewpoints that were shaped by historical events.



Monasticism

Zen transmission narratives are filled with stories of iconoclasm as monks are said to shout at and strike each other, as well as to cut off fingers or arms to display their attainment of enlightenment and to make fierce attacks on those who lack intuitive insight. In several examples, the disciple slaps the master,

who must admit when he has been bested by a student. Prominent members of the Southern school, including Mazu, Baizhang, Huangbo, and Linji, were particularly known for this kind of behavior. In order to eradicate a dependency on the written word, Huineng and Deshan were said to have ripped up or burned the sutras, while Dahui supposedly destroyed the woodblocks of his teacher Yuanwu's famous collection of kōan cases, the *Blue Cliff Record* (Chin. *Biyuanlu*, Jp. *Hekiganroku*).

However, it seems clear from a variety of sources that the tradition cultivated rigorous discipline and insisted that monks faithfully obey the Buddhist precepts, recite sutras, and perform their daily chores. This focus was in large part a response to social pressures in the competitive religious context of China and Japan. Although the transmission narratives highlight typically eccentric and irreverent Chan antics that are supposedly anti-canonical and subversive, non-Chan sources about the school from the period do not mention this approach. They show that conservatively managing the monastery grounds was the highest priority of the classical Zen institution. The disciplinary emphasis of Zen is also reflected in the requirement to adhere to external behavioral guidelines as well the need to gain support from political leaders. For example, Baizhang, whose nose was tweaked and ears shouted in by his mentor Mazu and who was slapped by disciple Huangbo in the legends, is primarily revered because he constructed a new set of monastic rules. According to Baizhang's instructions, monks who misbehaved were to be excommunicated from the temple and have their possessions burned. In a famous disciplinary anecdote, Japanese Zen master Dōgen had the meditation seat of an infamous disciple removed from the grounds so that nobody could occupy it in the future.

Despite claims of distinctiveness based on dedication to meditative practice, Zen temple life was probably not so different than that of other Buddhist schools. For example, Dōgen is usually highlighted for the way he stresses the role of "just-sitting" (*shikan taza*) and disputes other forms of practice. An often-quoted passage from *Bendōwa* says: "Do not practice the burning of incense [*shōkō*], making prostrations [*raihai*], reciting the name of buddha [*nembutsu*], repentance ceremonies [*shusan*], or *sutra* reading [*kankin*]. Just sit and attain the dropping off of mind and body [*shinjin datsuraku*]" (T 82.15c28–16a; see Griffith Foulk 2012). The passage would seem to support those who claim that Dōgen dispensed with all the beliefs, doctrinal formulations, and rituals that other Buddhist monks of his day embraced and that he took instead a "single practice" approach stressing sitting meditation. However, all of these practices Dōgen seems to negate in this single passage were in fact discussed extensively in his collected works and were no doubt in full practice at his Eiheiji temple.

Ritualism

From the early authorities, one might form an impression that Zen training takes place in a sparse, monochromatic environment devoid of images and icons. In contrast to this picture, it is clear that nearly all temples since the early history of Zen in China are filled with many kinds of rites and symbols. These range from enshrining relics and performing deification ceremonies for deceased masters, to the worship of various Buddhist and local gods through iconography and incantations or talismans, in addition to the exorcism of demons. As Griffith Foulk notes, “there is no validity whatsoever to the notion that Sung Ch’an monastic practice dispensed with literature, images, or rituals” (1993: 193). Today, numerous temples feature the veneration of quasi-historical or legendary Zen heroes, including Daruma derived from first patriarch Bodhidharma and portrayed as a limbless good luck charm (the Asian Humpty Dumpty); Hotei or the Laughing Buddha; Hanshan the poet-recluse, or the *arhat* Pindola who is part of the collection of the Five Hundred Rakan (*arhats*) (see Takeshi 1977).

Many Japanese Zen temples resemble other Buddhist and non-Buddhist sites by incorporating such elements as *torii* gates (generally painted gray, rather than the Shinto vermilion color) in addition to the mountain gate (*sanmon*); the ritual washing of hands (*te-mizu*) at the entranceway; burning incense; and selling fortunes in the form of plates (*ema*) and paper (*o-mikuji*). Furthermore, there are numerous dedicated prayer temples (*kitō jūin*) in the Zen network, some of which are among the most popular and thriving centers of the Sōtō and Rinzai sects. At these sites, *zazen* takes a backseat, if it occurs at all, to the assimilation of folk religious and devotional or esoteric Buddhist elements that serve the local community and from which the monastery derives its material support. Temples housing powerful spirits are primarily concerned with delivering to their congregations of lay adherents the power to heal ailments and provide an avenue to achieving worldly benefits (*genze riyaku*), including good fortune and prosperity as well as relief from misfortunes ranging from fires and floods to health problems and infertility (Reader and Tanabe 1998: 9–10).³



Culturalism

In modern discourse, the Zen institution has often been swept along in the tide of Japanese exceptionalism or the “Nativist Thesis” (*Nihonjinron*), which claims a special status and purity for many examples of traditional culture. However, it is clear that the social impact of Zen has been “contaminated” by

beliefs and practices that have “infected” all other Buddhist schools. Critics argue that the primary role of Zen in Japanese society, as with other Buddhist lineages, is not to promote the attainment of enlightenment for individuals, but the performance of funeral rites and then a series of ancestor rituals for householders collectively known as “funerary Buddhism” (*sōshiki Bukkyō*). These range from the Ghost Festival (*Obon*) every August, to memorial services on death anniversaries, and rituals dedicated to aborted fetuses (*mizuko kuyō*) (Taijō 1963).⁴

There are two main objects of recent cultural criticism. First was the participation by members of the Kyoto school of philosophy and other Zen spokespersons in the rhetoric of imperialism leading up to World War II. Second was discrimination directed against the outcast community that is evident in the manner of awarding posthumous initiation names (*kaimyō*) during funeral ceremonies. In these Zen rituals, the deceased were surreptitiously labeled with an inferior social status. The basic ethical flaw that links both seemingly disparate issues of militarism and social bias seems to be a failure to address moral concerns, which is a deeply entrenched problem reinforced by centuries of misguided behavior.

Furthermore, in his critique of modern (mis-)appropriations of Zen in his book *Shots in the Dark*, Shoji Yamada takes on as his primary targets (pun intended), two of the most hallowed iconic images. One is experiences of spontaneity depicted in *Zen and the Art of Archery* by Eugen Herrigel, a German professor who lived in Sendai, Japan, in the 1920s. Herrigel studied archery with the idiosyncratic master Awa Kenzō for a few years (though not the full six years claimed in his book) and returned to Germany where he became a Nazi sympathizer. The second is widespread admiration for the famous rock garden at Ryōanji temple in Kyoto, which was little more than a pile of weeds until interest in it was renewed by Western aficionados in the early post-World War II period.

Over the course of a few decades, these two phenomena that were not necessarily related to Zen tradition came to be presented by commentators as if they epitomized the Zen tradition, so that the martial and landscape arts could not be understood without referencing it, and vice versa. Accordingly, everything that has an “air of simplicity and solitude” (Yamada 2009: 22) is considered part of Zen, while Herrigel’s dictum that “all Japanese arts can be traced back to Zen” has prevailed in the general discourse even though it does not hold up to the most basic level of historical scrutiny. Herrigel is seen by many as the true Western representative of Zen, despite obvious shortcomings in his presentation as well as his personal and ethical life as a Nazi sympathizer. The irony of his fascist affiliations, which he tried to defend, makes a

counterpart to Zen apologists for the imperial regime as willing practitioners of pre- and/or postwar apostasy.

In the case of the rock garden at Ryōanji temple, this site made a remarkable transition. From being an obscure historical site where its beauty was often disparaged as merely constituting “a group of unsightly stones,” it was now celebrated as a representative of the “higher self,” the loftiest of Zen’s spiritual ideals. While Ryōanji is now known all over the world for its garden, up until around 1950 it was a poor, deserted site standing in a bamboo grove, rarely visited by anyone. Before the war, textbooks rarely mentioned the garden, which was not even cited in Suzuki’s *Zen and Japanese Culture*. “After the war was over, however, everything changed,” Yamada writes. “Like bamboo shoots popping up after a rain, official textbooks for the new postwar middle school system prominently featuring the rock garden at Ryōanji, complete with photographs, started to appear en masse” (Yamada 2009: 128).



Nationalism

For Zen critics, the claim of spiritual purity is a red herring that distracts from an awareness that the religion’s failure to resist and renounce intolerance and militarism. For example, the modern Sōtō master Harada Sōgaku, who in the years leading up to World War II referred to the Japanese as “a chosen people whose mission is to control the world,” also said of the “unity of Zen and war,” “[If ordered to] march: tramp, tramp, or shoot: bang, bang. This is the manifestation of the highest Wisdom [of enlightenment]” (quoted in Victoria 2003: 66–67). Harada appears to distort deliberately for nationalist purposes traditional Zen sayings such as, “When hungry I eat, and when tired I sleep,” or “When cold, be thoroughly cold; when hot, be hot through and through,” thus turning notions of mental clarity and equilibrium into vehicles for enforcing an oppressive social order. These associations linking premodern works with ethically deficient standpoints in the modern world can lead to a casting aside of commonplace and naive assumptions about Zen inevitably promoting harmony (*wagō*) and cooperation, and instead see it as a primary reason rather than remedy for many of the ills of Japanese society.

In *Imperial-Way Zen*, Christopher Ives provides a compelling overview of Zen’s entanglement with Japanese super-nationalism from the beginning of the Meiji period (1868) to the present. In complement to Brian Victoria, who castigates particular Zen masters for their subservience to the Emperor, Ives is guided throughout his study by the life and works of Ichikawa Hakugen, a

Rinzai Zen priest from Kyoto and also a scholar of historical Chan/Zen studies. Ichikawa shows that the problem with Zen before and after the war is that as a modern institution, it has offered little in the way of self-reflection or of genuinely taking to heart its own flaws and deficiencies. As he explains, “living like the water that takes the shape of whatever vessel into which it is poured, Zen Buddhists run the risk of succumbing to a kind of flexible, shifting submission that lacks the consistency of principles, conviction, and actions necessary for a critical social ethic” (Ives 2009: 71). Thus, “self-forgetting, harmonious non-contention, and obedience” (Ives 2009: 134), rather than a reform-minded attempt to change and uplift society, obscure Buddhist moral considerations. Ethics is limited to a sense of retributive justice based on a fundamentalist view of karma that reinforces a status-quo oriented, you “get what you deserve” outlook.



Conclusion: “Zen Skin, Zen Marrow”

The teaching of Zen Buddhism needs to take into account recent scholarship, which has shown that the tradition does not only contain an ideal realm of doctrine and practice but also that it has made accommodations within the mundane world and that these have triggered significant consequences for Zen in the modern period. The chickens of political affiliation and alignment with secular interests forged as part of Zen history in Song dynasty China have come home to roost in Japanese Zen’s submission to imperialism, its perpetuation of social discrimination, and its exponents’ (reverse Orientalist) discourse that falsifies the history of the tradition for the sake of gaining worldwide popular appeal. Applying recent historical studies to Zen Buddhism should lead to a greater rather lesser degree of appreciation for its monastic institution, and a constructive compromise in teaching about it: a balanced weighing of traditional discourse with historical criticism as seen through diverse sources.

In examining current debates regarding the role of Zen “rites” or literary records, Zen “rites” or monastic rituals, and Zen “rights” or public involvement issues, my book *Zen Skin, Zen Marrow* makes a basic distinction between the Traditional Zen Narrative, which embraces the transmission records, and Historical and Cultural Criticism, which tries to keep a skeptical distance from insider sources (Heine 2008). However worthy as a means of maintaining the tradition, in seeking to convey the subjective essence of the Zen experience by uncritically accepting Song dynasty texts, instructors risk conflating historical studies with hagiography and succumbing to apologetics. At the same time, in trying to uncover the socio-historical origins and ethical implications of

the tradition, the approach of Historical and Cultural Criticism can at times become overly strident and unwilling to recognize what was and is spiritually valuable. Striving for scholarly objectivity, one goes too far when utterly dismissing Zen as a mere social construct with reprehensible consequences for society.

In light of this division and debate, it seems imperative in teaching Zen in the twenty-first century to try to overcome extreme positions while seeking a middle way standpoint that surpasses a hyperbolic critique yet does not unconsciously fall back on conceptual categories that are outdated or misleading. The following principles can be used in support of this process: recognize that there is no winner or loser as each view expresses a degree of understanding yet is incomplete in itself; remain non-evaluative or uncommitted to a preference for a particular perspective while exploring a broad spectrum of multiple standpoints; maintain a constructively critical outlook in both exposing deficiencies and highlighting areas for revision and reform. In following these guidelines, Zen can be seen for what it is in its “is-ness,” which is interestingly enough exactly the way Suzuki has described the state of enlightenment awareness.

Notes

1. Alan Watts wrote an essay originally published in the late 1950s to dispel misconceptions (see Watts 1967).
2. Dostoyevsky’s famous parable “The Grand Inquisitor” comes to mind.
3. The new movie *Souls of Zen* (2013) that explores the tradition’s responses to the Fukushima tsunami disaster points out this feature of Zen monasteries in that coastal region.
4. A 1980s movie *The Funeral*, directed by Itami Jūzō, caustically portrays a Buddhist priest unable to conceal his interest in collecting a donation at the funeral of an old man whose family’s scandals are revealed.

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PART II

*Reimagining the Content
of “Buddhism”*

In Defense of the Dharma

BUDDHISTS AND POLITICS

Thomas Borchert and Ian Harris

Introduction: Good Political Actors Defending the Dharma

Buddhist monks have been in the news a good deal in recent years for their roles in politically oriented activities. Perhaps the most well-known set of monks and nuns engaged in this way are Tibetans who, for decades, have been involved in various forms of opposition to Chinese rule in Tibet; sometimes they have protested the form that this rule has taken, sometimes they have protested Chinese power as a whole. However, since 2010, there has been a particularly intense form of protest, primarily by monks and nuns in Sichuan and Gansu provinces (i.e., outside of central Tibet, also known as the Tibetan Autonomous Region [TAR]). Some of these monastics have immolated themselves, presumably because they feel that this is the most effective (indeed only) way to address Chinese imperialism in the region. Such acts of immolation, at least in the world's eye, harken back to the example of Thich Quang Duc, the Vietnamese monk who burnt himself to death in 1963. This monk's act was famously immortalized for Western audiences in a Pulitzer Prize winning photo by Malcolm Brown, and this picture was then used on the album cover of *Rage Against the Machine* in 1992. Most students probably understand that Thich Quang Duc's was an act of opposition to the Vietnam War, but in fact his protest was against what he (and other Vietnamese Buddhists) saw as the ruling Diem regime's efforts to privilege Christianity in its government's policies. In the same way, at least some of the Tibetan protests over the last five

years have been less about the Chinese government leaving Tibet, and more about the degree that Tibetans benefit from Chinese development.

Another recent example of Buddhists in the news is that of the monks of Burma as leaders of the "Saffron Revolution" in 2007. In September of that year, a number of monks picked up protests that had been taking place somewhat earlier, initially over the removal of fuel subsidies. One of the first acts of protest by the monks was a refusal to accept the donations of family members of high-ranking military members, done by turning their begging bowl upside down while going on alms rounds. At a bare minimum, this prevented those people from making merit, but taken to its extreme, it was a subtle yet clear condemnation. This initial act, which drew on protests by Burmese Buddhists in anti-colonial movements as well as on the participation of monks in the democratic protests and movements in the late 1980s following the end of the Ne Win era, led to several weeks of largely peaceful demonstrations and monastic protest marches. While this ultimately led to a crackdown by the ruling junta, in indirect ways it also seems to have been a catalyzing moment for the reform process that currently seems to be under way in the country. As such, the Burmese Sangha was part of the vanguard of a popular democratic movement.

Monastics "defending the *sāsana*," the teachings of the Buddha or the tradition as a whole, do not, however, always have such positive aspects. In the last year, members of the Burmese Sangha have been involved in protests that have been much less liberal. In Southern Myanmar, there are groups of Muslim minorities, the Rohingya, that have long had a tenuous place in Burmese society. While not generally violent, they are often described as a semi-nomadic people and are sometimes regarded by the majority as a threat to other communities of the area. In recent years, a number of Burmese Buddhists, lay and monastic, have been involved in efforts to either to ostracize or even expel the Rohingya from Burma. Photos of monks leading mobs in the region and postings on the newly available Internet websites show members of the sangha advocating violence against Rohingya men, women, and children. The point that we want to make from this is not that the Burmese Buddhists are bad people, but rather that they are people who engage in discussions and arguments in society that we might find laudable (pro-democracy demonstrations) but also those that we might find appalling (racism and anti-minority coercion). The political activities of Buddhists, like those of humanity more generally, do not always fit neatly into consistent, single narratives.

In studying Buddhism, attention to the political is absolutely essential. This is not because all Buddhists are inherently political, but rather because the religion is a social form inhabited by people. It is embedded in human

relations and, hence, in politics. To the best of our knowledge, since the time of the historical Buddha, Buddhists have interacted with all types of rulers, kings, governments, and states. They have been patrons, enemies, and allies with these “secular” powers; with but a few exceptions, the Buddhist tradition was never truly distinct or separable from social institutions or influential political figures.

While most scholars understand this, a direct engagement with the relations of Buddhism and politics still seems somewhat counterintuitive. Indeed, neither of us began our study of Buddhism with a particular interest in its political aspects, but we were led to this by our interactions with Buddhists in Southeast Asia. Harris began his academic studies in England in the 1970s when the prime emphasis in Buddhist studies was on the proper editing and explication of texts written in the classical languages. This was in line with the “Protestant” emphasis on “the book” and its priority on doctrine, as well as the established image of Buddhism as primarily a religion of renunciants. The idealization of this picture started to erode once scholars became more familiar with some of the historical realities of Asian Buddhism. Many of the monks he met were more comfortable studying texts in the vernacular than in Pali or Sanskrit, and interest in doctrine did not seem to be crucial to their existence; they rarely meditated, but performed many rituals designed to address the practical needs of their lay supporters. While the discrepancy between contemporary practice and the Buddha’s “original” dispensation used to be explained as a decline from an original state of purity, the “pure renouncer” is, and was, undoubtedly a minority option at best. The majority of Buddhist monks have, to a greater or lesser extent, accommodated themselves to the worldly realities of personal needs, perpetuating monastic institutions, and adapting to various socio-historical realities. This insight was brought into particular focus by conversations he had in the late 1990s with monks residing in one of the leading monasteries of Phnom Penh. Far from renouncing the world, these monks retained some personal possessions, such as photographs of family members and of Angkor Wat, an ancient Hindu temple and preeminent symbol of past Cambodian glory. Rather more surprisingly, most also possessed membership cards of the Cambodian People’s Party, the country’s governing political party. While some undoubtedly supported the party, it was also clear that success and even survival in the monastic order depended on good standing with the party.

Borchert’s attention to Buddhism and the political began when he was teaching English at a Buddhist high school in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in the mid-1990s. When a need to renew his Thai visa took him to Southwest China for a few weeks, he discovered a Theravada community where the post-Mao

efforts to rebuild Buddhism motivated many young boys to enter monasteries to learn about Buddhism and the local culture. Noticing that these boys were studying in religious "schools," but not attending the Chinese public institutions of learning, Borchert saw this as an expression of local and/or ethnic resistance to the Chinese state's efforts to internally colonize its border people. While he came to see this as a somewhat naive response, it highlighted to him one of the ways that Buddhists were profoundly linked to the politics of the societies in which they live.



Some Theoretical Considerations

There are two problems that make the study of Buddhism and politics complicated, particularly in the contemporary world. The first is the decentralized nature of Buddhism. There are, of course, at least three different types of Buddhism: the Mahāyāna of East Asia; the Theravāda of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia; and the Vajrayāna of Central Asia, Tibet, and Nepal, each with its varied sub-schools and lineages. Scholars could (and do) have discussions (passionate arguments) over how strongly divisions exist between these different basic forms. Yet, in terms of politics, Buddhist traditions have always been shaped by their national frameworks. While the tradition views Asoka (see typology 4, discussed later) as a kind of universal monarch who may be considered to have ruled over most of the Buddhist world in the third century B.C.E., for most of Buddhist history the governance of monks has been conducted primarily by local states. That is to say, there has never been a Buddhist equivalent of the Catholic Church ruling over a single "Buddhendom." Instead, Buddhists (whether nuns, monks, or householders) are subject to the kinds of rules that govern other religious subjects in the polity in which they reside. The primary consequence of this is that there is no single way in which Buddhists have participated in political processes, nor is there a single way in which states (whether kings, parliamentary democracies, communist governments, and everything in between) have exercised their control over Buddhism.

The second complication has to do with the attitudes that householders have about monks and nuns. In general, and indeed to overgeneralize, many people, both Western and Asian, think that Buddhist monks and nuns should not participate in politics. In part, we would argue, this comes from a misinterpretation of Max Weber's sociology of religion. In an effort to think about how religious orientations affected the development of modernity, Weber developed a typological framework describing how different religious actors

viewed salvation. For Weber, the “ideal type” for a Buddhist monk or nun was an actor who had an “otherworldly, ascetic” orientation. There were good reasons for Weber having made this judgment, as it maps onto the ways that some Buddhists at some points in history have viewed proper Buddhist action. Unfortunately, Weber’s ideal types took on a life he probably never meant for them, and subsequent historical studies have demolished his characterizations of Buddhism and society. But many Westerners have since taken to viewing the sole norm for monks or nuns as oriented toward the attainment of wisdom culminating in nirvana, or realizations of emptiness. In fact, as noted earlier, monks and nuns have always interacted with political figures, and some of them have been political figures. Appropriate political activity for Buddhist monastics and householders has varied according to time and geography.

Acknowledging the importance of local Buddhist cultures in determining the limits of Buddhist “political” action, one generality is that there is a distinct idiom for Buddhist monks and nuns to participate in political processes. If we think of the position of the Sangha within the structure of the “three jewels,” they have two prime responsibilities. The first, their most important, is to protect the teachings of the Buddha. The second is to transmit those teachings to householders (indeed, in some ways this is an action that is governed by the first). Throughout Buddhist history, monastics have engaged in activities that we can call political, but they have often couched their activities in careful ways. It is, and has been, important for monks and nuns to make it clear that they are engaging with politicians only for the sake of protecting the Dharma. For example, the Burmese Sangha’s resistance to British colonialism was generally framed in these terms. Most contemporary monks in Taiwan, Thailand, and Singapore, among other places, meet with politicians in very circumscribed ways, else they risk being labeled “political monks.” From this, we are suggesting that there is a monastic idiom which is sometimes in play, which allows monks and nuns to participate in politics in the background.

Making sense of this pattern requires clarification of what we mean by “politics.” Briefly, like “religion,” “culture,” and even “Buddhism,” politics can be defined in a variety of ways. It can simply be the rule of government, or participation in practices and institutions of governance. More broadly, politics can be understood as the competition over the control of resources and/or leadership within a society. Many contemporary Buddhists in Asia view politics within the narrower definition, and understand that monks and nuns should not participate in the political process. To these Buddhists, politics is “dirty” and potentially polluting for monks and nuns. It should be noted, though, that not all Buddhists feel the same way, particularly when it comes to issues like

voting. Indeed, whether monks and nuns should be allowed to participate in elections and/or hold political office is a matter of some debate within Buddhist societies. Monks in Thailand cannot vote in political elections: many agree with this, but there are also many monks who would like to be able to vote.

When defining “politics,” it is also important to consider the impact of “modernity” upon our reflections. Both of us specialize in modern forms of Buddhism (and indeed primarily, though not solely in Southeast Asia), when the nation-state is the dominant political form. While we see significant and important differences between premodern and modern political forms (such as the differences between kings and bureaucratic nation-states), we would also assert that, at least in the context of monastic interactions with governments, the continuities between past and present social forms far outweigh the distinctions between them. There are undoubtedly differences between kings and prime ministers and other politicians, but when monks or nuns interact with these figures, there may be significant parallels. Not only do kings and other politicians engage in merit-making activities for the sake of the nation (and their careers), but ordination has long been a refuge of sorts for a variety of political figures. For example, in the summer of 2014, Suthep Thaugsuban, the leader of protests against the government in Thailand and former deputy prime minister, ordained as a monk perhaps to make merit for those killed in protest, or perhaps to avoid prosecution. His actions echo, though they do not replicate, the ordination of a prince in nineteenth-century Thailand who would eventually become King Mongkut. He had ordained in order to avoid a conflict with his brother who had recently been crowned king of Thailand.



Typologies of Buddhists and Politics

In his groundbreaking analysis of the possible relations between Christianity and wider society, *Christ and Culture* (1951), Richard Niebuhr identifies a series of positions marking out the fundamental tension between Christian ideals and the putative imperfections of worldly existence. At one extreme, Niebuhr calls it *Christ against culture*, religion appears in purely antagonistic terms. It is represented most adequately by John the Baptist’s voice crying in the wilderness. At the other, *Christ of culture*, he describes a situation in which religion has so fully imbibed the spirit of the times that it becomes almost impossible to disentangle it from its wider societal context. Between these extremes Niebuhr recognizes three intermediate positions each of which may be regarded as an expression of specific Christian theological categories.

Niebuhr had been greatly influenced by a German liberal theological tradition in which Ernst Troeltsch was the seminal figure. Troeltsch, himself heavily dependent upon Weber, held that Christianity and Buddhism represent fundamentally opposed conceptions of the religious life, concluding that while Christianity is preeminently political, Buddhism “perhaps presents the opposition to the spirit of politics in its most acute form” (Troeltsch 1957: 157). This picture of Buddhist passivity and disengagement has its roots in earlier epochs of European thought and, as the rest of this section should demonstrate, represents a single-minded distortion of historical and doctrinal truth. But having said that, thinking about Niebuhr’s fivefold typology can be a useful starting point for thinking about Buddhism and the political domain. We offer six basic types of interaction, but it should be stressed that these are ideal typologies, meant to help understand the phenomena we find on the ground. “Real world” contexts are likely to represent a blending and overlapping of these pure types.

1. Complete Withdrawal. This is the option offered by the pure renouncer, an option that most adequately represents the Troeltschian position. We find this repudiation of the political represented by the Buddha’s great renunciation, the occasion when he left his palace home and in so doing rejected his father’s throne to adopt the life of a wandering holy man. It is also recapitulated in the biographies of many Buddhist saints from the tradition’s inception all the way down to the present. For a modern articulation of approval of this position we need only turn to J. R. Jayewardene, one of Sri Lanka’s recent presidents. The president was a great champion of Michael Carrither’s anthropological and historical study of Buddhist withdrawal, *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka* (1983), and in a speech delivered in February 1986, he claimed that he “intended to ensure that this book was translated into Sinhala . . . so that all people could gain some knowledge about the way of life of these monks. That was the real Buddhist way of life—not talking politics and abusing ministers, MPs and officials.”¹ We must assume from Jayawardene’s final phrase that not all contemporary Sri Lankan monks subscribed to his characterization of ideal Buddhist praxis. This typology should probably be seen as likely to be advocated by individuals, rather than monastic institutions as a whole.

2. Buddhist Authority over the Political. This typology and the next might be seen as the inverse of the first: different ways in which Buddhists (*qua* Buddhists) control the political domain. The first has Buddhists specifying the formal ideals that shape people’s lives, something like the Supreme Leader and the council of jurists of Iran. Such an ideal is found early in Buddhist history,

in two of the Buddha’s well-known sermons, the *Aggañña* and *Samaññaphala Suttas*. In them, he asserts the superiority of the renouncer over the wielder of secular power, the warrior (*kṣatriya*) or the king (*rāja*). In the *Aggañña Sutta*, it is the simple fact of the monk’s withdrawal from the social domain that causes this preeminence: “For those who rely on clan, the *kṣatriya* is the best in this world; (but) the person endowed with wisdom and (good) conduct is the best in the whole universe.”

The *Samaññaphala Sutta* goes further by suggesting that a ruler, no matter how powerful he may be, should make obeisance to the Buddhist monk, no matter how humble his parentage and social class. Several different textual genres, such as the *jātakas* and those dealing with the characteristics and career of an ideal type of ruler, the wheel-turning king (Pali: *cakkavatti*, Skt. *cakravartin*), sought to restrain the violent and arbitrary power of kings by yoking them to Buddhist virtues (Lewis 2003: 233–256). Various *jātakas*, for example, talk about the importance of “ten royal virtues” (*dasabhidharājadharmā*)—generosity, morality, liberality, uprightness, gentleness, self-limitation, non-anger, nonviolence, forbearance, and non-obstruction. The *cakravartin*, about whom there will be more below, extends his dominion not through the usual exercise of physical force but by the power of nonviolence (*ahimsā*). In a sense, the *cakravartin* represents a subversion of the political, understood as the naked exercise of authority, through the power of the *dharma*. Both the “ten royal virtues” and the discussions of the *cakravartin* can be understood as discursive tools to bind them to the Buddha’s sphere of influence (Reynolds 1972).

There are few good examples of Buddhists achieving such authority over the political domain. One was the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress’s attempt to delineate a Buddhist system of governance in its 1956 report, *The Betrayal of Buddhism*. Others include U Nu’s political reforms of Burma in the 1960s and the efforts of Thai monks to link Buddhism to the nation constitutionally in 2007. A more personal example is that of the Sri Lankan monk Ven. Maduluwawe Sobhita, founder of the Sri Bodhiraja Foundation, who presents himself as a “true monk,” constantly alert to the many problems confronting his nation. Promoting a message of fearless self-sacrifice, he has called for the creation of a “saffron army” (*kaha hamudāva*). But while ostensibly supporting the democratic process, he has argued that this saffron army should override any and all measures passed by Parliament that are deemed to be incompatible with *dharma*.

3. Fusion of Buddhism and the Political. Where the first typology of Buddhist dominance situates Buddhists separate from (and above) the political sphere, this typology represents a more intimate blending. Historically, this manifested

in two different ways: first a form that linked Buddhism to a people and a nation, such that all were understood to be Buddhist; second, an arrangement in which the state institutions and Buddhist institutions were one and the same.

The first form has been referred to as “state-protection Buddhism” (Chin. *Huguo fojiao*, Kor. *ho-guk pulgyo*). It began as a development in early Tang China, but soon spread to both Korea and Japan. Two Mahāyāna sutras provide the key to this form. The *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra for Humane Kings* (*Renwang bore boloumi jing*) describes the preparation of one hundred Buddha images and one hundred high seats for eminent monks who would recite the text when a country was in danger. The *Sutra of Golden Light* is a companion text. In its seventh chapter the four great kings of Indic mythology give assurances that they will:

perpetually protect, give refuge, guide, look after, avert retribution and ensure peace and happiness of the king of humans who listens to, venerates and worships the *King of Glorious Sutras, the Sublime Golden Light*. We will perpetually protect, give refuge, guide . . . the royal courts, their lands and regions. We will free these lands from fear, harm and conflict. Invading armies will be turned away.

In this manner, all sorts of delightful things would happen to the land, including years of good harvest and a happy people guided by the “ten virtuous deeds.”

That texts such as these were used in East Asia is quite clear. For example, a recitation took place following an earthquake in which a hundred people were killed in the Silla capital (Korea) in 779. The eighth-century Japanese capital of Nara was filled with monks who performed rites for the protection of the nation, and the ninth-century founder of Shingon Buddhism in Japan, Kukai, regularly performed rites to alleviate floods, famines, and other such disasters. The efficacious performance of such texts could only be accomplished by strong cooperation between the monastic order and the secular authorities, and so we use the term “fusion” in this context.² State-protection Buddhism, as the *Sutra of Golden Light* makes clear, has two consequences. It wards off danger and establishes a soteriological polity that combines the alleviation of suffering with unhindered possibilities for cultivating the Buddha’s teachings.

The second form of the fusion of Buddhism and politics is probably best exemplified by the Tibetan system of monastic rule under the Dalai Lamas. Growing out of a system of political patronage instigated by Mongolian warlords, the “priest-patron” system ultimately developed into a system in which the state was run by Buddhist monks, another obvious fusion of politics and

religion. While in some ways the accident of history, this fusion may well have been accelerated by the development of Buddhist tantrism, a system that places heavy emphasis on empowering the practitioner to the extent that he re-envisages himself in regal terms.

4. Antagonistic Symbiosis. Buddhist tradition has it that Ajātasattu, a king who reigned during the Buddha’s lifetime, first distinguished between two separable realms of power, the monarch’s worldly wheel of command (*āṇācakkā*) and the Buddha’s otherworldly wheel of the *dharma* (*dharmacakkā*). It was only a matter of time before these spheres would come into conflict and the unfolding of Buddhist history can rightly be viewed in terms of an oscillating tension between the two. The king on his side requires the support of the monastic order to provide legitimacy for his reign, yet also fears it as a source of potential opposition. The sangha, on the other hand, requires the material assistance of the laity, of whom the king is the leading figure, yet is resistant to the kinds of lay interference in its internal affairs that such a relationship may encourage.

The resulting arrangement has been termed “antagonistic symbiosis,” a relationship clearly depicted in the *Mañjuśhrimūlakalpa*, a text that offers the sangha’s quite inconsistent views of the historical king Gopāla. At one point it praises his administration of justice and patronage of Buddhist monasteries, but elsewhere engages in a thoroughgoing condemnation of the unrighteous condition of the society over which he governed.

Chief among the forms of interference inflicted by the king on the monastic order have been attempts at the latter’s purification. This process has often occurred at the beginning of a new dynasty when it might be thought a good idea to defrock potential opponents from within the monkhood. Purification may also have economic advantages for rulers since the wealth pumped into monasteries as donations in earlier times, such as tax-free land grants, can be confiscated as part of the process of reform.

In ideal and mythical ways, the wheels of “dharma” and “command” were married in the ideal of the *dharmarāja*, a figure epitomized by accounts of Asoka Maurya (ca. 269–232 B.C.E.), emperor of virtually the entire Indian subcontinent. Asoka should be understood as both a figure of history who had erected a number of pillars with inscriptions about the proper mode of governing and also a figure of Buddhist historical myth. In the former, he seems to have had something of a Buddhist bent, supporting the sangha but also exercising the right to intervene in its internal affairs. In the latter, he is remembered as having fostered Buddhist pilgrimage sites, made large-scale donations to the sangha, and promoted missionary activities to the rest of Asia.

The Buddhist tradition came to regard Asoka as an ideal wheel-turning king (*cakravartin*), in the sense that he exercised a form of statecraft guided by the “wheel” of *dharma*. Legendary and quasi-historical memories of the Asoka become an important blueprint for future Buddhist rulers across Asia. The *Mahāvamsa*, an important Sri Lankan chronicle, is a case in point. It tells of how Asoka’s son, Mahinda, converted King Devanampiya Tissa and implanted Buddhism in the island. It then examines the reigns of subsequent rulers to determine how their behaviors and policies impacted, for good or for ill, the health of Buddhism, as embodied in the *saṅgha*, its associated relics, and sacred sites. For the *Mahāvamsa*, then, the ideal king is, like Asoka, the pre-eminent patron of Buddhism (*sāsana dāyakā*).

In the modern period this antagonistic symbiosis has manifested itself around the issue of how far a monk may be involved in the political process. Some, especially those committed to our first typological position of complete withdrawal, claim that the monk should totally eschew politics. Others hold that the monk is a full citizen with all the rights of political engagement that this entails. The problem here is that the issue cannot be easily resolved by reference to Buddhism’s equivocal textual and historical traditions. This explains the confusing situation in which some monk activists are condemned for bringing Buddhism into disrepute, while others, such as members of Sri Lanka’s current Jathika Hela Urumaya (National Heritage Party), form parties specifically designed to fight elections in an attempt to “clean up politics.” It is not an overstatement to suggest that “antagonistic symbiosis” is the single most common type of Buddhist-political relations.

5. Buddhism in Conflict with the Political. Antagonistic symbiosis, an uneasy stasis, can easily spill over into outright conflict, and it is not always easy to draw a dividing line between the two. Many passages in the *jātaka* literature show considerable impatience with the rule of unjust kings. The story of Bhaddiya Thera, a king who quit his throne to enter the *saṅgha*, also strikes a cautionary note. Bhaddiya was called the “chief among monks of noble birth” (*uccakulikānaṃ*), and he rapidly gained liberation. But his fellow monks were puzzled by the fact that he was often heard to repeat the phrase “Ah, bliss. Ah, bliss.” When questioned on this by the Buddha, Bhaddiya recalled the great fear of assassination he had experienced as a ruler. Now, by contrast, he dwelt free from anxiety.

Buddhist history is full of attempts by monks to overthrow the established order. A fundamental motivation behind such rebellions is a perception that current political conditions are not conducive to the flourishing of the Buddha’s teaching. In some cases, this was the result of a king acting

against the *dharma*, particularly if he is a "foreign" or colonial ruler. In others, inauspicious conditions for the flourishing of the *dharma* have been seen as the result of the approach of the close of "the historical Buddha's" era. During the "end of the *dharma*," people would be unable to access the truths of the universe, and so life would be particularly unpleasant. The seeming similarity of conditions caused by the "end of the *dharma*" and difficult political or material circumstances have led at different points in history to a development of millennial movements based on the arrival of Maitreya, the next Buddha. The case of Ngo Prep is representative. A traditional healer and itinerant Buddhist monk raised a rebellion against the French in late nineteenth-century Cochin China. Believing that Maitreya would be reborn and soon establish a perfect kingdom, Ngo Prep and his followers sought to aid in this millennial event, but they disappeared from the historical record almost as quickly as they had emerged. Similar Buddhist messianic movements are attested in various historical periods in China, Mongolia, Indonesia, Japan, and Burma.

Buddhist opposition to political rule is certainly not limited to millennial frameworks, however. Indeed, since the late nineteenth century, monastic and lay Buddhists have been active participants in anti-colonial and/or nationalist movements. Han Yongun (1879–1944), a Korean monk who languished in Japanese prison for several years for participating in his country's March 1st independence movement; similarly, many Chinese monks participated in the resistance to the Japanese during World War II (though almost always in noncombatant roles). Likewise, the recent self-immolations by members of the Tibetan monastic community protesting China's heavy-handed colonization of the TAR may be seen as a particularly disturbing manifestation of the conflict between Buddhism and the political.

6. Authority of Political Power over Buddhism. This typology highlights the ways that Buddhists are directly subject to the power of non-Buddhist authority. This has been manifested in several different ways. In a variety of locations, Buddhist institutions and communities have been incorporated into the state as a faction or tool. A prime example of this would be the ways in which the Tokugawa Shogunate in Japan (1600–1868) centralized Buddhism during its reign as a part of its efforts to control the populace. Deeply concerned about rebellions, especially those based on Christianity, the Tokugawa required that all Japanese subjects be registered with a local Buddhist temple and gave Buddhist institutions a monopoly on death rites. While not directly employees of the state, Buddhist monks in Tokugawa Japan were deeply constrained by their responsibility to the state.

The second, and more overtly violent, form of political authority over Buddhists has occurred when political power holders, considering Buddhist influence to be threatening, have sought to curtail it violently. Recent examples include the almost complete elimination of Buddhism in Cambodia under the hyper-Maoist regime of the Khmer Rouge. A similar fate befell all forms of religious observance during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The canonical “sangha purification” in practice, at times, came close to outright persecution.

It would be a mistake to assume that the political persecution of Buddhism is a modern phenomenon. According to legendary sources it was suppressed by King Puṣyamitra Śuṅga (r. 185–151 B.C.E.) quite soon after its first ascent to prominence in ancient India. Puṣyamitra’s motivations are unknown, but he is said to have attacked monasteries, destroyed *stūpas*, put bounties on the heads of monks, and ordered their execution. Four separate persecutions of Buddhism occurred in China between the fifth and tenth centuries. The best known of these is the Great Suppression of 845 C.E., conducted during the reign of the Tang emperor Wuzong who, having just concluded an expensive military campaign, had powerful reasons for replenishing his treasury. Around the same time a Tibetan king, Langdarma (r. ca. 838–841), defrocked monks and closed monasteries.

There are various reasons underlying such events. One of the more enduring of these is straightforward doctrinal antipathy, a significant element in the history of Asia where Buddhist monks have been obliged to compete in a multireligious marketplace in which Brahmanism, Daoism, Confucianism, Islam, and Christianity have sometimes proved hostile. Social and political critiques have also been widespread. Complaints that monks “contribute nothing to society,” “undermine family relationships,” are too influential, seek to overthrow the established order, or are unpatriotic are nothing new. Xenophobia and nationalism may also play important roles in fostering hostility toward a religion that has its origins in faraway India. All of these critiques have been heard in the modern period, although they have now been supplemented by a scientific and rationalist spirit imported from the European Enlightenment. As James Ketelaar notes, with specific reference to the Japanese context, “it would be much easier to compose a list of those who were *not* ardently opposed to Buddhism in the nineteenth century” (1990: 14). During the Meiji restoration, moreover, a campaign to “abolish Buddhism and destroy Shākyamuni” (*haibutsu kishaku*) to serve neo-Shintō and modernism nearly succeeded in bringing about the tradition’s total eradication in Japan. The level of bloodshed during the campaign fortunately was not high. The same cannot be said of the Pol Pot period, the

Chinese Cultural Revolution, and Stalin’s almost complete liquidation of the Mongolian monastic order in the 1930s.



Two Cases from the Twentieth Century

As perhaps might have been evident from the examples cited, the “real world” is a messy place. The typologies winnow out some of this messiness to highlight the different kinds of relations that “Buddhist” actors and “political” actors might have. It is important to emphasize that “Buddhist” and “political” are analytical categories that the actors that we are discussing might not have recognized or cared about, at least not in the ways that we do in the early twenty-first century. We want to bring some of the messiness back in by highlighting two cases that show how Buddhism and politics are intertwined and that the ways in which the two are framed have a significant impact on the way we interpret specific events. It is through case studies that students can grasp the larger historical record.

The Case of Cambodia

The Cambodian royal chronicles are full of stories of Buddhist kings who, like Asoka before them, reigned in an exemplary manner. But there were many who did not. When Cau Bañā Nōm (r. 1600–1602) ascended the royal throne, he drank alcohol, hunted, engaged in debauchery, neglected the ten royal virtues, and did not support the *sāsana*. Because of his unrighteousness the country suffered drought, famine, disease, and brigandage; tigers entered the villages and meteors fell on the royal palace. Ultimately, he was tied in a sack and drowned, a famous monk apparently supervising this act of regicide! (Mak Phœun 1995: 95n59). We might regard this as an extreme example of the exercise of Buddhist authority over the political.

In the mid-nineteenth century, a former monk called Po Kambo incited a serious revolt against Cambodia’s French-controlled royal court. Supposedly armed with the sacred sword (*preah khan*) of traditional Cambodian kingship, Po Kambo raised an army of ten thousand that included many monks in robes and holy men (*neak sel*). The lengthy insurrection was only suppressed after Po Kambo was pursued to the center of a lake and beheaded.

A more significant act of Buddhist protest occurred in connection with the arrest of the monk Hem Chieu, who was charged on July 17, 1942, with eight offenses including the planning of an anti-French uprising, involvement in secret meetings with the Japanese, and “using witchcraft to make Cambodian

troops invincible.” Angered that the arrest was an act of sacrilege, a large body of monks and lay supporters gathered in Phnom Penh three days later. The event, later known as the “Umbrella War” may be regarded as the first coordinated anti-colonial agitation in the history of modern Cambodia. Nevertheless, many of the ringleaders were rounded up as Hem Chieu was found guilty of sedition and imprisoned on a prison-island. He died there in 1943, aged 46, and would subsequently become a national hero. Both the revolt of Po Kambo and the Hem Chieu affair have a strong anti-colonial character. In this sense they illustrate our fifth type of interaction, Buddhism in conflict with the political.³

The monk Khieu Chum (1907–1975) had been one of Hem Chieu’s young students. He fled the country soon after June 1942 and did not return until 1954, by which time his country had gained its independence from the French. From that point until the mid-1960s Prince Norodom Sihanouk, as head of state and in some ways basing his policies on the Asokan model, promoted a vague form of Buddhism Socialism as a way of forging a united, if somewhat unstable, front between Left and Right. But the policy was soon to unravel. The period coincides with the rise of Khieu Chum as a public intellectual. In due course he would plot with a number of individuals whose political consciousness had been raised in the aftermath of the Umbrella War to overthrow Sihanouk. In March 1970, they were successful. A new regime, the Khmer Republic, was soon established and its brief existence represents the zenith of Khieu Chum’s career. He played a significant role in drafting the new constitution, composed a national anthem, and wrote many of the new Prime Minister Lon Nol’s speeches. He also broadcast programs regularly on national radio where he justified the end of monarchy on Buddhist grounds and extolled republicanism as a form of governance in full conformity with the teachings of the Buddha. From our typological perspective Khieu Chum’s commitment to republicanism represents the fusion of Buddhism and the political.

Naturally, Khieu Chum came under criticism from conservatives within the sangha. In particular, he clashed with the country’s chief monk, the sangha leader (*saṅgharāja*) Huot Tat, who described him as a revolutionary monk who conforms to our first position of complete Buddhist withdrawal from the political. Chum responded by claiming that there is no explicit prohibition on monks being involved in politics in the Buddhist scriptures. He also made the point that the Buddha had encouraged his followers to exercise their judgment in all matters and that Huot Tat’s own rank as *saṅgharāja*, itself a highly political role, hardly put him in the most advantageous position to cast the first stone. The dispute was never resolved for Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge on April 17, 1975. Khieu Chum, Huot Tat, and many other

senior monastics, were rounded up and executed within a few days. Within a year, institutional Buddhism in Cambodia ceased to exist, except in exile. It had succumbed to arguably the most extreme authority of the political over Buddhism witnessed in twentieth-century history.

The Case of Contemporary China: Minority Buddhists in the Southwest

We see in China some similarities with Cambodia, especially the radical change in Buddhism's circumstances after a Communist revolution. While since at least 2000 there has been a strategic alliance between Buddhists (particularly monks) and the government, this has not been the case for the entire history of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Since 1949, China has been ruled by the Communist Party, which in ideological terms at least, adopted a highly critical stance to religious actors and institutions. Indeed from the founding of the PRC until the death of its first leader, Mao Zedong, the Chinese government ranged from being at best critical to at worst actively repressive of all forms of religion, Buddhism included. This reached its high point from 1966 to 1976, when the movements of the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" drove Chinese citizens to eliminate religion from their lives (along with other forms of "traditional" culture), and the government closed all religious places of worship (see typology 6). This was a terrible period in terms of how greatly the people suffered and the losses of both traditional culture and knowledge.

In terms of religion and politics, it is especially interesting to look at what has happened in China since the death of Mao in 1976. This period, known as the "Reform Era," has been marked by a relative liberalization of Chinese life, including religion. With some exceptions, the Chinese people have been able to engage in the practice of religion, though constrained by official regulations. While Buddhist life in China remains regulated in terms of the ability to open new places of worship, and when people can meet, there has also been a clear trajectory of liberalization. For most (and this is an important caveat) religious actors, the ability to practice religion in 2014 is much greater than it was in 1980 when the liberalizations began in earnest. One of the exceptions was the new religious movement known as the Falun Gong. A new religious movement combining *qigong* and Buddhist ideas and practices, the Falun Gong was a popular exercise/spiritual practice movement in the 1990s. However, when they actively, openly, and peacefully demonstrated in front of the Chinese government's main compound in Beijing in 1999, it incited government persecution that led ultimately to Falun Gong being declared an evil cult and a violent crackdown against its practitioners (a combination of typologies 5 and 6).

One of the interesting consequences of this, however, was that it opened up the opportunities for Buddhists in China. In the ideology of the government, Buddhism was and is understood to be a “normal religion,” a tradition that very rarely causes problems. Certain Buddhists might cause problems, but Buddhism as a whole does not. Over the last decade, in fact, Buddhists and the Chinese government have reached something of a working partnership. Even though officially Buddhism, like all religions, is considered a problem for society, the government has come to argue that religions like Buddhism that remain outside of “politics” provide good moral frameworks for the people. Even more, many local officials now use famous Buddhist temples in their development plans. As domestic and international tourism has become an important source of revenue within local economies, local officials sometimes rely on these temples to pad their coffers, even referring to famous temples as “smokeless factories.” However, it is important to understand that this partnership is sometimes an uneasy one, strained by competing agendas. Indeed, we might see this as a perfect example of one form of “antagonistic symbiosis,” typology 4.

A good example of this typology can be seen in the construction of a new temple in the city of Jing Hong in Yunnan Province, on China’s southwestern border. The region is home to a number of minorities and one of these, the Dai, practice Theravāda Buddhism, rather than the Mahāyāna Buddhism that is practiced throughout China. The monks of Jing Hong long wanted to build a new large temple, with a “college” for their students, as well as dormitories and spaces for conferences, and a very large statue of a walking Buddha. The cost of such a new temple went well beyond their reach until the local government put the monks in contact with a real estate developer from northwest China. A deal was reached between these three parties: the monks, the real estate developer, and the local government around the construction of a new central temple. The local government chose the space for the temple, enabling their anchoring it in the new development plan for the city; the real estate developer constructed the temple and paid for its construction, in exchange for being able to charge money for tourists to visit; the monks got a dazzling new temple. It seemed the perfect partnership, and a good example of how Buddhists in China and local governments have been able to find common ground and mutual benefits.

Yet almost from the beginning, there have been difficulties. The developer and the monks fought constantly over the aesthetics of the temple, over its design and what it would conclude. There was also a dispute over who would get charged for entrance to the temple. Local Buddhists were not supposed to be charged, but it became clear that the people who controlled the gate did not always know who the local Buddhists were. The biggest fight between the developer and monks came after the temple had been running for a while.

Concerned that the temple did not seem “authentic” enough for tourists, the developer had some lay workers dress up as monks and pretend to bless the visitors. The local monks were enraged. They complained to the government and organized several demonstrations at the temple itself. Eventually the local government was able to broker a deal between the two parties (for the good of the continued revenue if nothing else). The conflict fundamentally was between two different visions for the temple—tourist destination or religious space. While the parties have managed to work together and to maintain their partnership, the tension over these different visions remains.



Conclusion

While we began this article with some examples of Buddhist political action in the recent past, it should be clear that Buddhists have always been involved with political leaders, states, and governments. Our typologies clarify what the spectrum of these interactions have looked like, but they are not exhaustive. As both of our case studies show, the relationship between Buddhism and political formations over the last hundred years are complicated by local conditions, as well as by the national factors. One group of Buddhists in a polity might be in a relation of “antagonistic symbiosis” (typology 4), while another is in a situation of significant conflict (typology 3), and still other Buddhists attempt to avoid contact with state actors and the political domain altogether (typology 1). Indeed, rather than closing off conversation about the possible interactions between Buddhism and politics, we hope that our presentation will stimulate further reflection and analysis relating this important area of study.

Notes

1. *Daily News*, February 4, 1986.
2. Lest we think that this form was limited to East Asian forms of Buddhism, some contemporary Tibetans talk about the idea that the “Tibetan mind is a Buddhist mind.”
3. However, the royal symbolism associated with Po Kambo’s revolt also suggests an element of fusion.

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Conveying Buddhist Tradition through its Rituals

Todd Lewis

Buddhism is not a separate compartment of belief and practice, but a system of symbols, psychological attitudes, and ritual behavior forming the warp against which the woof of daily life is woven.

MANNING NASH, anthropologist studying Burma,
(1965: 104)

Practices of the monks are so various and have increased so much that all of them cannot be recorded.

FAXIAN, Chinese pilgrim in India, 400 C.E.
(Beal 1970: 1, xxx)

Introduction

Many early scholars held that “true Buddhists” followed a rational, atheistic belief system, and focused solely on meditation, fervently intent on nirvana realization; and that as its history unfolded, this tradition was corrupted by “popular” practices—especially rituals—that represent a deformation of the Dharma (the Buddha’s teaching). Many Western Buddhist converts and teachers find this interpretation agreeable, eager to see their own practice focused almost exclusively on meditation—a restoration of what they have assumed to be the original, pure tradition. But for anyone who has visited Buddhist communities across Asia or in immigrant institutions transplanted in the West—or who has studied the earliest texts systematically—it has become clear that this view of a pure, rational, ritual-free tradition is unfounded, a projection

rooted in the biased Western historical imagination. To teach the history of Buddhism today free of ethnocentric bias and ahistorical views, instructors need to address this issue, and do so informed by textual evidence and anthropological studies.

Since householder traditions and non-virtuosi practices have not been central concerns in most scholarly research since the inception of modern Buddhist studies (Schopen 1991b), many texts concerned with non-elite belief and practices written in canonical languages, and especially ritual manuals, still remain largely untranslated and unexplored. As a result, a proper documentary history of Buddhist ritual traditions, either in antiquity or today, has not yet been written. To compose an overview of Buddhist ritual, one must rely on what little ritual literature has been translated, eyewitness accounts by a few Chinese pilgrims who visited India from the fifth to seventh centuries, scenes from Buddhist art, and then anthropological accounts about modern Buddhists. Anthropologists have shown that the indigenous vernacular books that are in the hands of modern Buddhist monks are the true “working texts” of living Buddhism, and this was likely so in the past. These plus scholarship on praxis that has been published more recently (especially on death ritualism and relic practices), and now including monastic/temple websites, are the main sources available to convey living Buddhism to our students.

This pattern of using popular texts and finding rituals at the center of Buddhist communities is not a modern artifact. There was, in fact, a vast inventory of Buddhist rituals established by the first generations of disciples that grew over the centuries, as the quotation from the intrepid Chinese pilgrim Faxian (337–ca. 422 C.E.) reports about India only nine hundred years after the death of the Buddha. And then there are further elaborations of these ritual traditions that were added to “the innumerable” practices over the past 1,600 years until now!

At the outset, it is necessary to articulate a social historian’s model of Buddhism in which to locate its ritual history. Seeing this religion in practice, one must recognize:

- (1) the fact that monastics were a small minority in every known Buddhist society;
- (2) the reality that there is even a smaller number of individuals, past or present, whose adherence to the faith was primarily intellectual or philosophical; and that
- (3) the material support for this tradition throughout its history was primarily in the hands of householders and whose contributions were essential for the existence of the tradition.

It is the householder majority, then, for whom ritual activity, broadly defined, was their primary medium of “being Buddhist.” Attending to these “facts on the ground” requires recognizing the fundamental exchanges that sustained Buddhism as a living tradition. For it was these central, recurring, and clearly satisfying human actions that could—and did—elicit the loyalty of householders for the past 2,500 years.



The Textual Rationales for Buddhist Ritual

There is no shortage of early textual discourses that describe the Buddha giving injunctions and rationales for undertaking “popular devotional activities.” These are donation and protective rituals that make positive, meritorious contributions to those who follow the path and that serve to build and renew the foundations—material and metaphorical—of a Buddhist community. Thus, a set of key authoritative textual sources requires attention at the outset of this essay.

The Long Discourses of the Pali Canon (*Dīgha Nikāya*), part of the Basket of Discourses (*Sutta Piṭaka*), speak of the devout Buddhist’s duty “to help others in increasing faith, moral virtues, knowledge, charity” (N. Dutt 1945b: 169); the Pāli “Discourse to Sigālovāda” (*Sigālovāda Sutta*) specifically enjoins every householder to “maintain . . . the traditions of family and lineage; make himself worthy of his heritage; and make offerings to the spirits of the departed” (de Bary 1972: 43). The third and most sustained canonical text lauding the performance of Buddhist ritual is not one that most textbooks contain: the *Connected Discourses* (*Ānguttara Nikāya*) of the Pāli Canon. To provide students with texts instilling historical and sociological imagination, let them also read the passages that have the Buddha specifying the ideal of disciples pursuing the actions and rituals mentioned in this text’s “Four Conditions” and “Four Good Deeds.”

This text is not concerned with the 5% of the population who were in the monastic elite; in this teaching, Shākyamuni addresses the major concerns of the Buddhist householder’s life, as he instructs the “good Buddhist” to seek the four conditions:

There are these four conditions which are desirable, dear, delightful, hard to win in the world. Which four? . . .

[1] Wealth being gotten by lawful means . . .

[2] Good reputations among kinsmen and teachers

[3] Long life and attaining a great age . . .

[4] When the body breaks up, on the other side of death may I attain happy birth, the heaven world! (Woodward 1992: 2:74; with numbers added)

How should this moral and Buddhist householder who has earned wealth then invest his time and money? The Buddha next enjoins him to perform the Four Good Deeds:

[1] [He] makes himself happy and cheerful . . . he makes his mother and father, his children and wife, his servants and workmen, his friends and comrades cheerful and happy. . . .

[2] He makes himself secure against all possible misfortunes, such as by fire, water, the king, a robber, an ill-disposed person . . . so he takes steps for his defense and makes himself secure . . .

[3] He makes the five-fold offering (*bali*): to relatives, to guests, to hungry ghosts, to the king, and to the gods (*devatā*) . . .

[4] He offers gifts to all such recluses and brahmins . . . who are bent on kindness and forbearance, who tame the one self, calm the one self . . . and for such gifts obtain the highest result, resulting in happiness [here] and [merit] leading to heaven. (Woodward 1992: 2:75–76; with numbers added)

This passage ends with praise of one whose wealth has been used fittingly in these ways, who has rightly “seized the opportunity,” and who has “turned wealth to merit.”

The provisions and actions articulated in this canonical text are, in fact, remarkably congruent with modern anthropological accounts of Buddhist societies across Asia: householders still want such basic human blessings in this life and seek similar spiritual goals. On the ground and in the lives of Buddhists—then as now—rebirth in heaven is a “good Buddhist” aspiration; then as now, the Dharma taught by the Buddha speaks to the householder’s situation: a “good Buddhist” fosters family ties, allows for “energetic striving” after economic success, justifies rightful seeking after worldly happiness and security, and underlines the virtue of being a donor and patron.

Contrary to those who hold idealized reductive views of what the Buddha actually taught, here the Great Teacher specifically applauds the religious virtues of faith and the legitimate aspiration of Buddhists seeking heaven; and this canonical Pāli sermon is a decisive proof text that shows that the Buddha not only believes in divinities, but here he clearly requires householders to do “the good deed” of worshipping hungry ghosts and local gods. (Monastic requirements to do the same will be discussed later.)

Thus, to focus solely on elite texts designated to guide the rare meditation master or philosopher is to miss the center of Buddhism in society and in history. Instead, it is important to recognize three interlocking tracks of

Table 7.1 Three interlocking tracks of legitimate Buddhist religious activity

Pragmatic Well-Being	Moral Cultivation	<i>Immediate Nirvāṇa</i> Seeking
ritual/merit-making	merit-making	meditation
▼		▼
95% of population		less than 5% of population

legitimate Buddhist religious activity and the place of ritual in the Buddhist world (see table 7.1).

The first two ideals are sought through the work of ritual. Thus, a sound working definition of a “good Buddhist” is simple: one who takes the three refuges (reliance on the Buddha, Dharma, and monastic community) and who conducts the necessary ritual practices. And implicit in the performance of ritual is the systematic, lifelong garnering of merit, to which we now turn.

The early and useful formulation for analyzing the tradition’s own definition of what constitutes a Buddhist community is found in the term “the gradual teaching” (*anupūrvīkathā*). It implies that the Buddha assumed that there were (and are) inherent, natural differences between individuals, and that these are due to the fact that every person bears a different heritage of former acts, or karma. Since there is this natural scope of diversity in any society, the compassionate spiritual guide must try to match the level of the Buddha’s teaching with a disciple’s capacity to understand doctrine and take action. The *anupūrvīkathā* comprises a curriculum of legitimate and progressive Buddhist practices, a kind of “syllabus” for systematically advancing in spiritual attainment. What does this say about what it is that “good Buddhists” should do? The progressive advancements on the path in the *anupūrvīkathā* move forward in a clear hierarchy of stages (see table 7.2).

It is obvious again how gift giving/merit-making is the foundation for Buddhist practice; it is also clear that the performance of ritual is a necessary and expected practice for “good Buddhists.”

As merit-making has provided the chief orientation point and goal in the Buddhist layman’s worldview and ethos, gift-giving has always been the starting practice for accumulating merit, the lifelong measure and accumulation of spiritual advancement. Merit-making has been the universal, integrating transaction in Buddhist societies, regardless of whatever was the monastic intellectual elite’s orientation toward various Theravāda, Mahāyāna, or Vajrayāna doctrinal formulations or spiritual disciplines. Providing students

Table 7.2 Hierarchy of progressive advancements on the path to Nirvāṇa realization in the *anupūrvīkathā*

5. Four Noble Truths ^a
↗
4. Value of ascetic renunciation
↗
3. Evils of <i>pāpa/kāma</i> (immoral acts/pleasure seeking)
↗
2. <i>Shīla/svārga</i> (morality/heaven rebirth)
↗
1. <i>Dāna/puṇya</i> (donations/merit[-making])

^a As cited in Lamotte 1988: 77.

with this insight can make the complexities of the elite doctrines and practices more coherent to them, as they can see that the virtuosos and their soaring spiritual and philosophical accomplishments were built on the support of householders.

Students may find it initially confusing, however, that the great majority of Buddhist householders—from antiquity until today—oriented their lives not around meditation but toward making merit to have a better next birth, perhaps in heaven. Indeed, a very often repeated refrain spoken by the Buddha was for monastics to take on the responsibility “of showing the laity the way to heaven.” Merit accumulation is needed to reach heaven. Although it is true that Buddhist doctrine holds that heaven is a temporary state and that *nirvāṇa* realization entails the final, eternal cessation of karma and suffering, the faith’s ultimate end; but still, the Buddha taught that in the long path through cyclic existence (*samsāra*), the aspiration for heavenly rebirth and its bliss, even if it is temporary (like all other rebirths), had its legitimate place in the tradition. (And it was infinitely better than rebirth in the multitude of hells . . .)

Finally, the full sequence of the *anupūrvīkathā* together conveys why moral living (that avoids demerit and earns merit) and merit rituals (that can garner merit in large quantities) figure so prominently in Buddhist life: it affects the natural law of karma acting on individual destiny that has both next-life effects as well as practical, this-worldly consequences (see, e.g., Obeyesekere 1968; Holt 2004). Here, it should be noted that even in the earliest texts, many Buddhists became monks or nuns for the great merit earned by doing so and because being “in the robes” opens many opportunities to earn great quantities of merit, as is evident from the progression in *anupūrvīkathā* list above

toward asceticism. The same motivation holds true among monks and nuns entering the sangha (monastic community) today.

The final canonical text that should be included for historical understanding has the Buddha explain exactly how to earn merit in the course of one’s life for the purpose of spiritual advancement. Again, given his propensity for lists, the Buddha enunciated Five Cardinal Precepts (*shikṣādāni*) that all disciples, monastic and laity, must progress through on the path the *nirvāṇa*:

1. *Shraddhā* (faith)
2. *Shīla* (moral observances)
3. *Tyāga* (generosity)
4. *Shrūti* (listening)
5. *Prajñā* (insight) (Lamotte 1988: 70)

How did Buddhists live according to these Five Cardinal Precepts as the tradition developed, grew to be a South Asian, then global world religion? Through ritual. By venerating images (fulfilling *shikṣādāni* 1), taking precepts and fasting (*shikṣādāni* 2), organizing compassionate actions and charitable institutions (*shikṣādāni* 2, 3), arranging public recitations of the texts (*shikṣādāni* 4), and encouraging meditation, the final stage and essential practice that cultivates the inner spiritual discernment of reality, *prajñā* (*shikṣādāni* 5).

But the most universal and typical expression of lay Buddhist faith and merit seeking has been through the rituals of gift-giving (*shikṣādāni* 3): feeding, clothing, and housing the sangha; building shrines, funding charities, and so on. Gift-giving’s “investment” is described and celebrated in the *Birth Stories* (*jātaka*) and *Legends* (*avadāna*) literature as well as in the great Mahāyāna discourses (*sūtra*).¹ Mahāyāna texts agree in the primacy of gift-giving to the individual as an expression of compassion (*karuṇā*) and for its value as a renunciatory practice for the donor as well. We now turn to see the multitude of ways that Buddhists sought to fulfill these canonical ideals in their daily lives.



Major Buddhist Ritual Traditions

It was for regularizing needed gift-giving presentations that monks and laity developed standard ritual procedures (*pūjā*) and calendrical norms, many that were already part of a common Indic tradition based on the lunar calendar and the region’s norms of etiquette, purity, and pollution. Buddhist rituals evolved that complemented meditation and study; specific rituals were seen as

compassionate actions that could achieve specific beneficial results for suffering humanity. For the Mahāyāna devotee, *pūjā* was quintessentially an expression of skillful means (*upāya*), a disciplined act that aids the spiritual destiny of all beings, self and others.

The Monthly Calendar for Rituals and the Indic *Uposatha*. Buddhist ritual life has always followed the phases of the lunar month. Based upon this calendar, the two extreme phases of the moon's appearance were deemed observance (*uposatha*) days, with the key *uposatha* day each month the full moon (the twelve hours on both sides of the moon's peak fullness) that has always been singularly auspicious. The Buddhist year then is punctuated by twelve major holy days.²

Uposatha days have imposed a strict requirement on the monastic community, who had to join together for their own, private ritual recitations on these days, and then serve the needs of the community with sermons and consultation, all as specified in the monastic mode, or *Vinaya*. Emphasizing the fundamental interdependence between sangha and lay community, householders have been encouraged to visit their local monasteries (*vihāra*) on every *uposatha* day to make offerings to the sangha and to the different sacred objects found there. (These are enumerated later.)

On these days, devout lay folk (*upāsaka*, *upāsikā* (women)) can take the opportunity to observe eight of the ten monastic rules while residing continuously on the monastery grounds. The usual lay precepts of no killing, lying, stealing, intoxicants are followed; the precept of no sexual misconduct is changed to abstinence; and three additional rules are followed, namely: not to participate in secular entertainments, not to wear perfumes, garlands, or fancy clothes, and finally not to eat after noon. Accordingly, these devout Buddhists wear plain white clothes and reside on monastery grounds continuously for twenty-four hours. The laity's frequent observance of fasting after midday (until the next sunrise) led to their being commonly referred to as far back as ancient times as "fasting days." In punctuating life with these rituals, the lunar fortnight rhythm has always dominated the Buddhist festival year (Cassaniti 2015).

The Buddhist calendar also regularly highlights the eighth lunar days (*aṣṭamī*) of each fortnight as especially auspicious for rituals. In the classical period, *aṣṭamī* is also called a "fasting day," and this seems to have been the common lunar day chosen to hold ritual and festival events outside the monasteries. For example, the bright *aṣṭamī* day of the lunar month of Jyeṣṭhā is mentioned by Chinese pilgrim Faxian (in India and Lanka from 399 to 414 C.E.) as the day when a great Buddhist chariot festival was celebrated in Ashoka's former capital Pāṭaliputra (Legge 1965: 79; N. Dutt 1977: 39). Chinese pilgrim

Xuanzang (in India from 629 to 645), to cite another example, also records that there were three months each year—Phālguna, Āṣāḍha, Kārtika—when Buddhists observed special rituals and “long fasts.”

Rituals of Buddhist Monasticism. The *Vinaya*, the texts of monastic rules and stories about how regulations came into existence, were central to the communal life in the sangha institutions created by the Buddha. The specific rules of residence in each monastery were copied and consulted regularly across Buddhist Asia; communal life was based upon the proper ritual demeanors ordering the lunar-cycle based monastic calendar; from the ordination hall to the latrine, from the wearing of robes to the hierarchy among monks, from settling disputes to expelling rule breakers, the monks and nuns were expected to live a disciplined life that was regularly punctuated by, and governed by, prescribed rituals. Each sangha in ancient India had its own autonomy, and in addition to the general guidelines for monastic life in the *Vinayas*, there were also local ordinances (*kriyākāra*) to which those monks wishing to live in any specific establishment also had to conform.³

It is also clear that monks were told by the Buddha in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* to do other rituals. One ritual that has been performed daily in most monasteries across Asia is each monk or nun setting aside a morsel of food for the *pretas*, hungry ghosts; these were typically collected by a serving monk, then deposited on a stone set close to the monastery boundary. Commonly found in the archaeological records of South Asia, such stones are a ubiquitous feature of Nepalese and East Asian monasteries up until today.

Other ritual requirements recently brought to light were those that instructed monastics to recite ritual verses for the monastery’s tutelary guardian deity and another for a traveling monk to make a set recitation for the deity of any well or water source used in his travels (Schopen 2002: 380). The continuation of such ritualism by monks today in Thailand has been recently studied by McDaniel (2011). Proper funerals for departed monks and nuns were a special concern for the early sangha (e.g., Schopen 1992).

Rituals of Ordination: Novice and Full Monastic Vows. Elaborate rituals were developed by the community around the monastic initiations for novices (Pāli, *pabbajjā*) and full monks (*upasampadā*). In Theravāda contexts until today, families of the candidate arrange for elaborate fun-filled processions to the monastery, in imitation of Siddhārtha’s life as a prince and his departure from householder life. Music, dancing, and merriment prevail. When the monastery boundary precincts are reached, the candidate gives away whatever wealth he has brought along, showering the audience with presents, from coins to sweets. Then with his closest family members alone, he enters the

silent ordination hall of the monastery where, after making donations to the sangha, he goes through an elaborate series of rituals, the first of which is having his head shaved (as he holds a tuft of his own hair as a reminder of impermanence). Before an assembly of at least ten ordained monks, he must then certify his eligibility for admission, be assigned a preceptor, don his monastic robe, and take possession of his begging bowl, after which he repeats each of the ten monastic precepts of the novice, as prompted by his preceptor. Only men at least twenty years of age can be given the full ordination.

In East Asian traditions, the ordination rituals are similar, with local additions such as having incense applied to the ordinands' skin. Scars form, implying the ordained monk's or nun's lifelong commitment to the sangha. The regional Mahāyāna interpretation of the *Vinaya* has added other elements such as having candidates take bodhisattva vows (to help others reach emancipation) and adopt a purely vegetarian diet.

The lifelong expectation of staying "in the robes" for the rest of one's life is not found in modern Theravāda traditions, where the custom of adolescent, premarital short-term monasticism evolved in Theravādin Burma (Spiro 1971), Thailand (Tambiah 1970), and modern Mahāyāna Nepal (Gellner 1992). In these places, "entering the robes" for most young men is more about merit-making for one's parents than genuine trial periods of monastic life. Those who remain monks often do so with considerable ambiguity; some find the traditions of monastic education compelling and remain (McDaniel 2008).

For Monastics Only: *Prātimokṣa* Rituals. Each fortnight on the new and full moon days, Indian sangha members had to gather together at one time, without householders present, to recite the vows of "individual liberation" (*prātimokṣa*). This recitation is a terse summary of the categories of monastic regulations, and after each section's rules are repeated, the chanting of it pauses for each monastic present to affirm—by keeping silence—being in conformity with every major and minor rule. This recitation is held in the morning, and after any infractions committed over the previous fortnight have been confessed (*ālocanā*) beforehand in private to the monk's superior. Thus, for the sangha, *uposatha* became the regular ritual occasions to review, correct, and certify the proper standards of monastery discipline.

Monastic Rain Retreat: *Varṣāvāsa*. In keeping with the monthly lunar cycle, the most prominent yearly Indian Buddhist monastic observance was the monsoon rain retreat called *varṣāvāsa* (Pāli, *vassa* or *vassāvāsa*). Dating from pre-Buddhist ascetics and adopted by Shākyamuni for his sangha, the rain retreat practice, as required by the *Vinaya*, was first marked by a ritual of commencement. For the next three months, rules curtailed monks' mobility outside the monastery and encouraged meditation and study for its three-month duration

(Wijayaratna 1990). (Exceptions to continuous residence included the need for a monastic to attend to elderly parents.) One ritual requirement incumbent on monks at the start of the rain retreat found in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* (the main “working text” for most Buddhist monks in northern India and, later, Tibet) was that monks must worship the Buddha as well as the monastery’s local protective deity (Schopen 2002). Among the largest donation events of the year, *varṣāvāsa* ritual ceremonies mark the beginning, formal ending (*pavāraṇā*), and new robe donations (*kāṭhina*) to monks who gather together for the retreat. The *pavāraṇā* ceremony is much like the biweekly *uposatha* for the monastic community; but for the householders, their emphasis is on a grander scale of merit making, as many regional traditions hold that gift-giving on this day is more fruitful than at other times. *Kāṭhina*, the post-rain retreat presentation of new robes by the laity, likewise garners special karmic rewards, a tradition that endures across Theravāda Southeast Asia (Tambiah 1970: 154–160).

For historical reasons not yet understood, in East Asian Buddhist monasteries, these Indian precedents were not followed. At most Chinese monasteries (where there was also no monsoon), there were no *uposatha* days. The only liturgical change on the 1st and 15th of the month was the addition of certain items to morning and evening ritual devotions. A summer monsoon retreat was also generally ignored, although some monks were aware of it from their *Vinaya* study.⁴ At many Chinese monasteries during these same summer months, however, it was customary to arrange for this summer period to be a time for study, for the abbot or other masters to expound the *sūtras*, or for a spell of intensive meditation such as the *sesshin* traditions in Chan/Zen training monasteries.

Buddhist Ritual Chanting. Chanting rituals link the Buddha’s spoken words with simple deeds. The stories connected to the *paritta* texts of the Pāli Canon indicate that the Buddha created these rituals to provide compassionate this-worldly assistance to both monastics and householders. In these, monks chant one of eight recommended texts while the leader among them pours water, symbolizing the blessing’s dispersal. A thread linked to an image or water vessels is held by all in attendance; and at the conclusion of the chanting (that can take a few minutes or days, or even weeks . . .), the thread is rewound into a ball; then the monks tie pieces broken off to encircle the necks or wrists of those attending. The water that has been infused with the Buddha’s words is also used to lustrate individuals and sites, imparting protection and auspiciousness.

The earliest Mahāyāna rituals in this same mode were conceptualized as an element in a bodhisattva’s service to other beings, emphasizing mastery of word chains known for their spiritual powers: mantras and (if longer)

dhāraṇīs. These holy words—also part of the Dharma—are found in the *rakṣā* literature (Skilling 1992). Their being given to the sangha by the Buddha to alleviate human suffering is conveyed in the stories that form part of these works. Mantras can be spoken to protect the speaker, the sangha, new shrines, homes, as well as entire settlements and even countries. Resort to these formulas was also one of the divisions in early Buddhist medicine (Zysk 1991: 66). This ritual chanting, which eventually included entire texts, was thought to strengthen the foundations of spiritual practice; it was also done to generate good karma and radiant auspiciousness for towns and domiciles, especially at key moments of life cycle passage or crisis.

Ritual traditions developed expansively as Mahāyāna Buddhism began and developed. This is clear in early East Asian Buddhist history, where cumulative *dhāraṇī* traditions were instrumental in the successful missionization of China and Japan when emperors, doubtful about Buddhism’s nature, were converted based on the elaborate rituals performed by Buddhist monks to protect the realm, as well as the imperial family’s well-being (Strickmann 1990).

Myriad Buddhist householder rituals evolved to organize the regular performance of mantra recitations for households and communities across Asia (Copp 2014). The mere presence of one of the most popular text of recitations, the *Pañcarakṣā*, was believed to provide protection for houses and families (see Lewis 2000: ch. 5).



Buddhist Festival Traditions

We now turn to the specific yearly observances that defined early Buddhism in practice. Like other great world religions, Buddhist cultures ordered and shaped time through regular monthly and yearly festivals. Some festivals orchestrated the reliving of classical Buddhist events *in illo tempore* (Eliade 1957: 70): Celebrations of the Buddha’s birth, awakening, and final liberation (*parinirvāṇa*) are universal, although their performance differs with regard to dates (Swearer 1987); other more regional sacred events likewise mark the year (Gombrich 1988), as different communities were free to assign their own definitions for these “auspicious days.” These include Shākyamuni’s ascent/descent from Tūṣita heaven to preach to his mother, or events marking a key point in the lives of bodhisattvas such as Vessantara (Cone and Gombrich 1977; for Thailand, see Leffords 2012), the Mahāyāna bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, or the death anniversary of a local saint (Tambiah 1984; Strong 1992). More festivals will be cited in the following sections, as related to the timing of the rituals described.

Primary Constructions: Relic *Stūpas*. The Great Teacher’s instructions on how to handle his body, cremation, and the resulting remains established the central tradition of Buddhist ritual. The Pāli *Discourse of the Great Final Liberation (Mahāparinibbāna Sutta)* describes the first rituals specified by the Buddha to venerate his cremation relics, “The Mallas of Kushinara also brought water scented with all kinds of perfumes . . . surrounded the bones of the Exalted One in their council hall with a lattice work of spears, and with a rampart of bows . . . there for seven days they paid honor, and reverence, and respect, and homage to them with dance, and song, and music, and with garlands and perfumes” (T. Rhys-Davids 1969: 130–131). Until the present day, Buddhist relics and *stūpas* are venerated just so, amidst drumming and musical accompaniment.

Since then, the depositing of relics in circular mounds surmounted by a symbolic royal umbrella made the *stūpa* (or *caitya*) central focal point and the singular landmark denoting the tradition’s spiritual presence. The Chinese pilgrim journals confirm what has been found in the archaeological record: *stūpa* construction and worship were carried out at the key venues in his religious career. The tradition eventually recognized a standard “Eight Great *Caityas*” for pilgrimage and veneration.

Worship at these shrines, as large as a hillock or as small as a backyard shrine, became the chief focus of Buddhist ritual activity linking veneration of the Buddha’s “sacred traces” to an individual’s attention to managing karma destiny and mundane well-being. The Chinese pilgrim Yijing (in South Asia, 673–687 c.e.) noted the rich variety of forms these shrines had assumed a thousand years after the founder’s death, with each made according to specific ritual tradition:

The priests and laymen in India make *caityas* or images with earth, or impress the Buddha’s image on silk or paper, and worship it with offerings wherever they go. Sometimes they build *stūpas* of the Buddha by making a pile and surrounding it with bricks. . . . This is the reason why the *sūtras* praise in parables the merit of making images or *caityas* as unspeakable . . . as limitless as the seven seas, and good rewards will last as long as the coming four births. (Takakasu 1982: 150–151)

The archaeological record shows that *stūpas* were frequently built in the center of monastery courtyards, often by monks themselves (Snellgrove 1973: 410; Schopen 1989). Yijing’s journal also notes that performance of *stūpa* ritual was at the center of the sangha’s communal life:

In India priests perform the worship of a *caitya* and ordinary service late in the afternoon or at the evening twilight. All the assembled priests come out of the gate of their monastery, and walk three times around a *stūpa*, offering incense and flowers. They all kneel down, and one of them who sings well begins to chant hymns describing the virtues of the Great Teacher . . . [and] in succession returns to the place in the monastery where they usually assemble. (Takakasu 1982: 152)

One final form of *stūpa* ritualism in ancient India had a votive cum mortuary aspect (Schopen 1987). Certain prominent Buddhists, including monastics (Schopen 1989), arranged to have their own cremation ashes deposited in small votive *caityas*, often placed together and close to a larger Buddha relic *stūpa* (Schopen 1991b, 1992a). These structures seem to have been deployed as a means for perpetual merit generation for the deceased. In East Asia, monastic cemeteries carry on this tradition.

Despite the many understandings that Buddhists of every level of sophistication advanced regarding *stūpas*, in practice all could nonetheless converge to mark events associated with the buddhas or saints. *Stūpas* thus became the natural sites for some of the other Buddhist festivals of remembrance and ritual veneration.

“Best of Constructions”: Rituals of Monastery Building. A monastery (*vihāra*) can be of humble construction or built to imperial or aristocratic standards. Each must have a place for the monks to sleep and a site where those in residence gather for required rituals, and this must be marked ritually with boundary stones (*sīmā*). Only here can a legal ordination or *uposatha* confirmation that conforms to *Vinaya* ritual be held. A ceremony is essential for a donor to legally donate the land and its buildings, fittings, and so on to the sangha: the donor holds a brick and as he presents it to a representative of the sangha and he pours water over it, ritually declaring his intention.

Some texts made quite specific recommendations to the laity regarding the best ritual donations yielding the highest merit return, and a monastery built according to these stipulations produces maximum reward. The Sanskrit text *Objects for Merit-Making (Puṇyakriyāvastu)*, for example, arranges the following hierarchy of donations for Buddhists, tying securely the wish for individual good karma with gifts that strengthen the sangha’s material existence:

1. Donating land to the sangha
2. Building a monastery on it
3. Furnishing it

4. Allocating revenue for it
5. Assisting strangers
6. Tending the sick
7. In cold weather or famine, giving food to the sangha (Lamotte 1988: 72)

Texts from the origins of Buddhist history have applauded the great merit accruing to those who build monasteries, and modern studies show that this view of monastery building exists right up to the present (Welch 1967; Tambiah 1970: 147ff.). In antiquity as now, there are extensive ritual procedures for establishing the site and then erecting the various structures that can constitute the “monastery” such as dormitories, image halls, ordination halls, meditation halls, refectories, *stūpas*, *bodhi* trees, and storage halls. Skilled monks were appointed superintendents for this work (Schopen 2002). Here as in most other areas of Buddhist life after 600 c.e., the Mahāyāna tradition developed much more detailed ritual procedures (see, e.g., Skorupski 2002; Tanemura 2004; von Rospatt 2010). Later texts such as the *Kriyasamgraha* specified elaborate ceremonies to be performed in the construction of monasteries. What is certain is that for all Buddhist monasteries, there was a ritual of legally handing over the site and buildings, and then at most, a yearly festival to celebrate its anniversary of dedication, and these yearly “birthdays” were times when donor families did refurbish and clean it.

Buddha Images: Construction and Veneration. The making of Buddha shrines and images entailed rituals of proper construction, consecration, and upkeep (Gombrich 1966). The Chinese pilgrim Yijing around 680 c.e. describes the role of images in Buddhist practice, especially for those who are not advanced in their spiritual standing:

There is no more reverent worship than that of the Three Jewels, and there is no higher road to perfect understanding than meditation on the Four Noble Truths. But the meaning of the Truths is so profound that it is a matter beyond the comprehension of common minds, while the ablution of a sacred image is practicable to all. Though the Great Teacher has entered Nirvana, yet his image exists, and we should worship it with zeal as though in his very presence. Those who constantly offer incense and flowers to it are enabled to purify their thoughts, and also those who perpetually bathe his image are enabled to overcome their sins . . . receive rewards, and those who advise others to perform it are doing good to themselves as well as to others. (Takakasu 1982: 147)

Such were the sentiments that legitimated the elaboration of Indian Buddhist ritual and festival traditions, and this historical observation is matched by texts such as the Mahāyāna *Entry into Bodhisattva Deeds (Bodhicaryāvatāra)* that laud precisely these activities.

Another common ritual in India was “Bathing the Buddha Image” that commemorated Shākyamuni’s birthday in the month *Vaiśākha*. As described in the *Nīlamata Purāṇa* written in Kashmir around 800 C.E.: “In the bright fortnight, the image of the Buddha is to be bathed with water containing all herbs, jewels, and scents and by uttering the words of the Buddha. The place is to be carefully besmeared with honey; the temple and *stūpa* must have frescoes, and there should be dancing and amusements.” This practice seems to have spread across all of Buddhist Asia. It is still popular today: on the festival day commemorating the Buddha’s birth, an image of a “baby Buddha” is placed on a stand in a large, decorated basin; using a ladle, Buddhist householders, one after the other, draw water from another bowl (that also contains flowers) and pour lustrate over the image.⁵

Image *pūjā* (“ritual”) at this and many other times was practiced by entire monasteries in conjunction with the lay community, by family members together in their own homes, and by individual monks with their private icons. Some texts provided additional practices to accompany this action, such as found in the popular Mahāyāna text entitled *The Vow of Benevolent Conduct (Bhadracaripraṇidhāna)* that specifies “A Ritual in Seven Stages” to be done before a Buddha image:

1. Honor the Buddha
2. Serve the Buddha
3. Confession of misdeeds
4. Delight in good actions of beings
5. Invitation of Buddhas to preach the *dharma*
6. Arouse the thought of one’s own future enlightenment
7. Dedication of merit to all beings (Lamotte 1988: 433)

Here building on the first two that entail offerings and gestures of respect, merit-making is central to these and each other action. This sequence of ritual acts also incorporates practices that are thought to advance an individual’s spiritual maturity that are typical of the Mahāyāna path to awakening and altruism to all beings.

Many Buddhist ritual texts across Asia mention detailed procedures for image worship, beginning with rites of consecration, periodic image-bathing rites with anointed water along with repainting and repolishing; and specific

procedures for how the icon should then be reinstated in the temple, with offerings of incense and flowers, accompanied by music.

Our seventh-century Chinese pilgrim Yijing underlines the immense merit earned by Buddha image rituals: “The washing of the holy image is a meritorious deed which leads to a meeting with the Buddha in every birth, and the offering of incense and flowers is a cause of riches and joy in every life to come. Do it yourself, and teach others to do the same, then you will gain immeasurable blessings.” A popular Khotanese Mahāyāna text from Central Asia concurs, stating that anyone who makes a Buddha image is guaranteed rebirth in future Buddha Maitreya’s era; another passage in this text has the Buddha state that worshipping an image is said to be equal in merit to venerating him in person: “Whoever in my presence should perform rituals, or whoever should produce faith equally before an image, equal will be his many, innumerable, great merits. There is really no difference between them” (Takakasu 1982: 151–152). Thus, many Mahāyāna discourses, in agreement with the *Discourse of the Great Final Liberation*, laud as especially meritorious offerings of incense and flowers to Buddha and bodhisattva images, all done with musical accompaniment (Emmerick 1968: 321).

Mobile Image Rituals: Buddha Image Processions and *Ratha Yātrās*. According to the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, the tradition of buddha image processions began under monastic supervision. As Schopen (2005) has pointed out from his reading of this work, definitive for north India Buddhist monasteries, monks themselves were encouraged by the Buddha to carry out, and supervise the propriety of, various festival celebrations. One, called in this work *Mahāmahā* (“Great Festival”) or “*Mahāpūjā*,” entailed a procession of an image of the “bodhisattva” Siddhārtha as he meditated under a tree as a youth. The *Vinaya* authorizes the making of the image in the monastic precincts, decorating it with silks and ornaments, and then building a fittingly decorated palanquin or wagon to carry it. Monks are told they must be in charge of the image throughout the festival, from when it “goes into town” to when it is taken “on a circuit of the region,” and are instructed how upon return to the monastery it should end with dignity. This text also clarifies how the participants from “across the region” should be fed by the sponsor, and how to collect the rather great largesse that is given, and accumulated, by those wishing to “have *darshan*” (view) and honor the image.

A reference made above is to the most extraordinary Indian form of buddha image veneration begun in late antiquity in numerous locations: the *ratha yātrā* (“chariot festival”). The Chinese pilgrim Faxian noted that in ancient Pāṭaliputra there were images of buddhas and bodhisattvas placed on twenty

four-wheeled, five-storey *rathas* made of wood and bamboo. Beginning on an *aṣṭamī day* and continuing for two nights, the local merchants (*vaishya*) are said to have made vast donations from specially erected dwellings along the path; in Khotan, too, there was a fourteen-day event that was attended by the entire city, for which each monastery constructed a different four-wheeled *ratha* (Legge 1965: 18–19). Nepal's surviving *ratha yātrās* focused on Avalokiteshvara have been documented (Locke 1980; Owens 1989), including on film (Tseten 2005).

Mahāyāna Text Festivals. Another Mahāyāna ritual focused on the “cult of the book” (Schopen 1975). According to the early *Perfection of Wisdom* (*Prajñāpāramitā*) texts, veneration of the Buddha's *dharma* was vastly superior to worshiping his bodily relics. A section of the *Lotus of the True Doctrine* (*Saddharnapūnarīka*) describes how the most superior ritual act is one in which a Mahāyāna text is venerated, especially while being carried on devotees' heads (Hurvitz 1976: 82). It was the *Prajñāpāramitā* and *Pañcarakṣā* texts in later Indic traditions that were the object of book veneration, including both the reading of the texts themselves and making offerings (*pūjā*) to them, a tradition that is still found in modern Nepal (Lewis 2000; Kim 2013).

Indian Mahāyāna Vratas. Still surviving in the Himalayan region, Indic religious obligations (Skt. *vrata*, Tib. *nyungne*) are special Mahāyāna forms of sangha-led, lay-sponsored ritual practice that focuses on basic doctrines amidst devotional attention to a particular Buddha or bodhisattva (Locke 1987; Lewis 1989; Rinpoche 2009). Doubtless originating in the lay wish to engage in spiritual practices on *uposatha* or *aṣṭamī* days, *vratas* were the means by which groups could devote one or more days to fasting, making offerings, meditating, hearing stories, and maintaining a high state of ritual purity.

Pilgrimage. Travel to venerate *stupas*, *bodhi* trees, and images in monasteries, especially those marking important events in the Buddha's life, also defined early Buddhist ritual practice (Lamotte 1988: 665). As the history of the great monarch Ashoka (ruled 273–232 B.C.E.) indicates, this was perhaps the very earliest Buddhist ritual, one that conceivably could have led to the need to elaborate other early ritual practices as sites developed, shrines were built, and offerings grew in number (Gokhale 1980; Schopen 2005).

By 400 C.E., if not earlier, Chinese accounts suggest that such meritorious veneration of the Buddha's “sacred traces” was organized into extended

processional rituals. Such texts also promise the laity vast improvements in their karma destiny as well as mundane benefits as rewards for undertaking pilgrimage. The development of pilgrimage traditions shaped the early composition of site-coordinated biographies of Shākyamuni (Lamotte 1988: 669); the needs of pilgrims likely pressed monks to compile some of the first *Birth Stories* and *Legends* collections. The Mahāyāna tradition in China likewise developed pilgrimage traditions focused on great mountains, where visions of and blessings from celestial bodhisattvas were possible (e.g., Nanqing and Yu 1992). The most famous and earliest established was probably at Mount Wutai in northern China. Pilgrims residing there sought spiritual connections to Mañjuśrī. What is remarkable is the recently discovered fact that by 700 C.E., monks dwelling in northern India went off on this arduous two-year pilgrimage to China seeking this blessing!

Many Mahāyāna sources assert that sites identified with bodhisattvas were also centers of pilgrimage. As one Khotanese text affirms, “Whatever Bodhisattvas for the sake of *bodhi* have performed difficult tasks such as giving, this place I worship” (Emmerick 1968: 163). It is noteworthy how every region of Asia developed its own Buddhist overlay of pilgrimage involving mountains, sites for saint veneration, with monasteries built to “colonize” the sacred venues.⁶

Buddhist Rituals for Royalty and *Pañcavārṣika*. For most of its history, the Buddhist sangha has existed in polities ruled by kings or emperors. As part of its successful adaptation to Asian societies, the tradition developed a worldly rapprochement. The monastic community adapted its rules to avoid conflicts with secular laws, refusing, for example, to admit military deserters or individuals absconding from debt. On the positive side, monks could offer special kudos to political leaders who acted justly and supported it with bestowing prestigious titles (*bodhisattva*, *dharma rāja* [“just king”], *mahādānapati* [“lord of great generosity”], *cakravartin* [“wheel-turning spiritual leader”]) to those who were most exemplary.

The just king in Buddhist social theory is the first among laymen, and King Ashoka (304–233 B.C.E.) was portrayed in Buddhist literature as the paradigm for later rulers (Reynolds 1972c; Strong 1983). Early texts also mention an extraordinary festival that Ashoka performed every five years, one that expresses the fundamental exchanges within the Buddhist polity: *pañcavārṣika*. It was a festival orchestrating vast royal donations to the sangha, other deserving ascetics, brahmans, and the destitute; *pañcavārṣika* was also a time for displaying extraordinary images or renowned relics during these festivities organized by kings and merchants, and witnessed by a huge social gathering.

Merit Transfer: Rituals for *Pretas* and Hell-dwellers. As we have seen, Buddhist monks and laity were instructed from the beginning of the tradition that merit is a kind of spiritual commodity. Once it has been earned (from rituals or donations), it can be shared with other beings with a formal verbal pronouncement. In almost every locale where Buddhism has existed, and as we have seen for Indic monastics, it is a custom to put out food at special sites so that suffering hungry ghosts (*preta*) may find succor. Sharing merit also is nearly ubiquitous, whether it is transferred to hungry ghosts, gods (whose favor one wishes to attract), or to hell-dwellers (whose time of intensive suffering can be lessened). This became a major ritual practice across all Chinese Buddhist schools; a key study of this tradition in East Asia is found in Teiser (1988).

Death Rituals. In all Buddhist societies, death rituals are the purview of the monastic community. The funeral and mourning rites are a major time for monastics to expound on the Dharma and for the sangha to receive donations from the mourning family; the merit earned from these is then transferred to the dead at this crucial time. Death is when an individual's karmic retribution decisively plays out in rebirth destiny; Buddhist ritual traditions around death seek to help the dying pass on in a peaceful state of mind through chanting and guided visualizations. Post-death rituals make and transfer merit to influence the rebirth destiny, a logical extension of karma doctrine. In the Buddhist tantric tradition, additional rites evolved to assist the dead in the "intermediate state" between births such as the Newar Buddhist tradition in Nepal that is associated with the *Elimination of All Evil Destinies Tantra* (*Durgatiparishodhana Tantra*) (Skorupski 1983). The most famous such tradition known in the West is a late text, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Lopez 2011), that prescribes how a tantric teacher (lama) should offer advice to the disembodied individual's consciousness daily for seven weeks. Recent research and scholarly focus on this topic has documented a host of rituals developed over the centuries by Buddhist monastics designed to offer assistance at this time of crisis (e.g. Lewis 1994; Cuervas and Stone 2011; Williams and Ladwig 2012).

Votive Amulets and Rituals. Anyone traveling to a society where Buddhism is a living tradition today, and who visits a major shrine, will inevitably find items for sale that householders purchase and deploy for protection and spiritual practice. The items are myriad: items to hang from their car's rearview mirror, in the kitchen, or around their necks or wrists; images and rosaries. Studies have shown that these are often linked to major economic and institutional benefits to local Buddhist traditions. Important treatments of this still-vital area of monastic production (creating and empowering) and

householder activity (purchase and use) can be seen for Thai Buddhism in Tambiah (1984), and for Japanese Buddhism in Tanaka and Reader (1998).

The votive tradition is anything but a modern innovation, as it has ancient origins. Archaeologists who have excavated ancient Indic Buddhist sites (e.g., Taddei 1970) have found tens of thousands of clay and metal items that are certainly the correlate of modern amulets made of plastic and cloth. Pilgrimage centers of old, sites like Bodh Gayā (where the Buddha was awakened), clearly had merchants who sold clay replicas of the shrine for rank-and-file pilgrims, while the richer devotees might purchase larger metal images. Buddhist texts like the *Pañcarakṣā* depict the Buddha praising and recommending amulets that tap the power of the Dharma. Whatever the medium, these were doubtless taken back home to become part of the family shrine or to be worn to garner the protection of empowered sacra sanctioned by the earliest tradition.

The Constant Formulation of New Buddhist Rituals. Just as the urge to make merit is integral to Buddhist life, and as the ethos of adapting the tradition to changing times and locations is strong (*upāya*), so have monastics and householders felt free to devise new practices for merit-making and protection. There are many examples of this across the Buddhist world today, from *boke fuji* amulets introduced into Japan to combat senility (Tanaka and Reader 1998), to the popularizing of “Bodhi [Tree] Pūjā” (Obeyesekere and Gombrich 1988) in modern Sri Lanka and the post-revolutionary revitalizations of Buddhist traditions in Vietnam and Laos (Holt 2009). Once free to do so after 1976, Chinese Buddhists designed a host of new Buddhist amulets for use in cars; in Nepal a new procession in connection with the *Nāmasaṅghīti tantra* (“Collection of Names Tantra”) has been added in recent years to popularize a resurgence in this old meditation tradition dedicated to the celestial bodhisattva Mañjuśrī; and cyber-savvy Tibetan devotees who have devised CD disks that are full of mantras, and that spin meritoriously in their disk drives! An Internet search can doubtless reveal other innovations that take advantage of new technologies.



Conclusion

After the past fifty years of research in the field of Buddhist studies, instructors teaching college courses in Buddhism have no grounds to purvey the impression that Buddhism is unlike all other religions in being “only a philosophy” or due to its lacking a vast array of ritual tradition. This chapter has provided an overview of just how central and important ritual has been in Buddhist history. From monastic life to protective amulets for the barely observant, ritual has defined Buddhist life from its origins forward.

Whatever else we might surmise about Buddhism's vast and variegated history, it is clear that the tradition in every society ritualized spiritual ideals and incorporated pragmatic traditions into monastic iconography and ritualism, textual chanting, *stūpa* devotions, the festival year, and the life cycle rites of individuals. It is a universal phenomenon that all societies must train the young to perpetuate their cultural traditions. The success of Buddhism in its reaching across Asia and beyond, in urban settings and villages, conveys to the historian that it was effective, powerful rituals that have conveyed its doctrines and ideals to devotees. Indeed, one way of explaining this remarkable history is Buddhist ritual. In all its many variants, and in the hands of monastics free to improvise and who have been attuned to adapting the Dharma compassionately, ritual has always been at the center of the life of Buddhist communities. It is an intervention that seeks to shape for the better the human experience, training devotees in compassion, promoting generosity, imprinting a habit of analyzing the mind's tendencies, among many other goals.⁷ So it has been Buddhist ritual that was designed to shape consciously and beneficently the life experiences of its adherents; when vibrant, these practices ultimately pointed them away from suffering and toward advancement in spiritual maturity.

As long as there is a Buddhist sangha, and as long as suffering remains a mark of human existence, Buddhists will—as they have for 2,500 years—take refuge in the Buddha's teachings, including those endorsing ritual practices as useful on the arduous path to nirvana. Instructors of Buddhism wishing to convey the history of this tradition need to have students read praxis texts along with philosophical treatises, understand the institutional foundations of the tradition by reading about the sangha's many rituals, and delve into well-documented ethnographic case studies of specific communities and their ritual traditions. We owe it to our students to allow them to glimpse the full humanity of Buddhists, and to see how both belief and practice were integral to Buddhism's successful global diaspora.

Notes

1. There is a principle in the Buddhist reckoning of the merit earned that often surprises students: the greater the spiritual standing of the recipient, the greater the karma reward to the donor. Generosity to all beings is applauded, but the best "merit return" accrues to gifts to the buddhas, *bodhisattvas*, and the sangha.
2. In Sri Lanka, e.g., every full moon is regarded as commemorating a key event in the life of the Buddha, or in Sri Lankan Buddhist history.

3. See Schopen 2002: 362. One common and erroneous assumption is that the Pali *Vinaya* is a source to generalize from for ancient Indic history. The Pali Canon only ever had authority in Sri Lanka, and then in Southeast Asia where Sri Lanka played a pivotal role in the post-twelfth-century installation of this tradition. In South Asia, the *Sarvāstivādin Vinayas* were the key sources; unfortunately, these far larger texts have not been translated into European languages. The new monograph by Shayne Clarke 2013 is destined to be a landmark study in shifting the false impressions created in early scholarship about the sangha.
4. Some individuals might choose to observe it as a special spiritual season, but in most institutions life continued as usual without any of the Indic practices.
5. They imitate accounts that have gods doing so at Buddha’s birth in Lumbinī.
6. For case studies of Buddhist pilgrimage in recent publications, see, e.g., Naquin and Yu 1992; Huber 1999; Reader 2006.
7. To use technical textual analytical vocabulary, rituals shape for the better (*kushala*) an individual’s *skandhas* (the five basic components of personhood): the physical body, sensations, perceptions, habit energies, and consciousness.

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PART III

*Issues in Teaching, Practice,
and Connecting Students
with the Tradition*

Teaching Buddhism in the Western Academy

Jan Willis

Introduction

I have been teaching university courses in Buddhism for almost forty years. While my main area of expertise is Tibetan Buddhism, I teach the entry-level course in Buddhism as well as a number of more specialized seminars. After taking my large lecture course, "Introduction to Buddhism," students are allowed entrance into the seminars "Tibetan Buddhism," "Women in Buddhist Literature," "Buddhism in America," and "Socially Engaged Buddhism." Typically, students who have completed the Intro course have gained a fairly good grasp of major Buddhist ideas and historical developments and are thus equipped to take up these more focused investigations. I can offer such a variety of courses in Buddhism at the undergraduate level because, for the most part, I have taught primarily at highly selective liberal arts institutions which have always wanted their students to know about other world cultures, and because I first began teaching in the mid-1970s when Asia was being viewed by the Western academy with renewed interest.

Teaching Tibetan Buddhism at the undergraduate level, however, does offer unique challenges. Many of these have to do with the difficulty of the terms in Asian languages, as names and places are difficult for untrained students to read, pronounce, and remember. Finding accurate and engaging teaching materials which are neither too watered-down nor overly laced with Tibetan names and terms is difficult. A far larger issue, however, has to do with the distinctive features of Tibetan Buddhist tantrism, with its incorporation of esoteric yogic and meditative practices and with its focus on the mythic

vs. literal forms of presentation and interpretation. Determining how best to present this to typically young undergraduate students is a challenge.

Moreover, as a corollary of Tibetan Buddhism's esoteric character, one must typically study the Tantric tradition—as I did—with, and from, Tibetan practitioners within a cultural matrix and milieu where a close teacher–disciple relationship is a necessary requirement. This model of study, however, where one is in many respects dependent upon a living teacher (rather than, say, a text or group of texts), is viewed in Western academia with suspicion and as preventing the objective “distance” deemed a requirement of academic studies in institutions in the West. I have personally witnessed the intra-departmental tensions surrounding the phenomenon of the “scholar-practitioner” and of the idea of introducing “practice”¹ into the classroom. My challenge has been to teach this subject in an honest, engaging, and balanced way. In this chapter, I will take up these broader topics—teaching Buddhism, teaching Tibetan Buddhism, and the “scholar-practitioner” issue—each in turn.



Teaching Buddhism in the Western Academy

A “liberal arts education” ought to be, it seems to me, “liberative” and liberating. After all, that is the essential meaning of the phrase.² Students (and their parents) choose a liberal arts college or university—over a vocational or technical or professional school—precisely because the liberal education is intended to steer students away from the narrow foci on specific practical training and to open them up to broader perspectives. A liberal arts education ought to render to the student a freedom from narrowness, other ways of viewing and living in the world, and the ability to imagine alternative solutions to problems. At its best, a liberal education should produce a thinking citizen of the world with high ethical values and compassionate concern for others. It is, arguably, within such an educational environment—and, certainly, with this as my goal—that I teach a series of courses on Buddhism at one of the elite colleges in the Northeast.³

Let me begin with a brief description or outline of my “Introduction to Buddhism” course. There is a rather standard progression: I begin with a focus on the Indian background prior to the advent of “Buddhism,” discussing the subcontinent’s geography, history, peoples, and pre-Buddhist religious traditions. Having established this as context, I then turn to the “life” of the Buddha and his impact on “Aryan society” (mentioning, but not discussing at length, the contentious modern debates surrounding the issues of dating and

myth-making as I do so⁴). Next, I take up the Buddha's Teachings or *Dharma*, laying out and honing in, over the course of the next three weeks, on key ideas: the Four Noble Truths, middle way, eightfold path, *karma*, *nirvāṇa*, *śūnyatā*, and Theravāda versus Mahāyāna views. This takes us through the first half of the Introduction course.

During the second half of the course, my focus becomes topical. Usually I address in turn, three specific areas—from a possible number of headings: “Women and Buddhism,” “Tibetan Buddhism,” “Chan and Zen Buddhism,” “Socially Engaged Buddhism,” or “Buddhism in the West”—devoting two weeks each to the three rubrics chosen. If I focus two weeks on Tibetan Buddhism in this course, I use Lama Yeshe's *Introduction to Tantra* (2000) along with a selection on “The Distinctive Features of Tantra” from the Dalai Lama's text, *The World of Tibetan Buddhism* (Gyatso 1995: 93–102). I also “pair” the readings of two *nam-thar* (sacred biographies), one of the famed yogi, Milarepa, and the other of the Indian *siddha*, Naropa.⁵ These two legendary life stories in particular highlight the importance of the notion of “guru-devotion” in Tibetan Buddhism as well as provide exciting tales of liberation each in their own right. In the beginning of the Introduction course, I typically have students read the entirety of Walpola Rahula's *What the Buddha Taught* (1974);⁶ at the course's end, I have them read Stephen Batchelor's *Buddhism without Beliefs* (1998). This pair makes for a lively comparison and is helpful in showing students how their own “modernity” issues cause them, mostly unconsciously, to re-envision “what the Buddha taught” according to their own needs, desires, and contemporary cultural and social milieus.

I think that, broadly speaking, my Introduction to Buddhism course in its earliest years could be seen as privileging texts over contexts and philosophical discourse over narrative, but I have tried each subsequent year to balance this out by offering more and more narratives⁷—after all, so much of the Buddhist canon, whether *sūtra* or *vinaya*, is actually framed within narrative—and by showing students that Buddhism is a living tradition that is practiced by actual living Buddhists.⁸ In order to drive home this point, my courses now emphasize narratives as well as philosophical discourses. I love to tell stories and I do so, liberally. I also show Buddhists practicing, whether through the use of powerpoint presentations or contemporary DVDs. A recent film like *Zen Buddhism: In Search of Self*,⁹ for example, provides a visual context in which to anchor discussions not only about *Zen* practice but also the life of ordained communities and about Buddhist women practitioners, in particular. For a visual sense of “engaged Buddhism,” I show the film, *Dhamma Brothers*,¹⁰ which also introduces students to *vipassana* practice as well as serves as an exemplar of one of the most established practices of engaged Buddhism, namely “prison Dharma.”

Students come to this introductory Buddhism course anxious to learn primarily about two things: “emptiness” and meditation. They have done retreats themselves or know someone—perhaps a parent—who has done one. They have read Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha* or Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums*. They have seen images of His Holiness the Dalai Lama on the jumbotron in Times Square. They have seen Buddhist monks on TV commercials. They have watched Bertolucci’s *Little Buddha* or Scorsese’s *Kundun*. They have traveled to India, or Nepal, or Japan. They are the epitome—and more—of what Thomas Tweed has dubbed “night-stand Buddhists” (2002: 17–33).

Within this gathering of highly intelligent, well-read, well-traveled, multi-tasking and theory-driven students, I want to make space for the unhurried contemplation of Buddhist ideas;¹¹ I want these ideas to touch them where they live, in their minds and also in their bodies. Often this involves—as in the case with the Buddhist notion of “selflessness” (*anātman* or *shūnyatā*; variously translated as “non-self,” “emptiness,” “voidness,” or “interbeing”) subtle and not-so-subtle simple repetition of the idea from different angles. Stories are also helpful here. At other times, introducing students to actual methods of meditation is helpful.¹² In the end, as much as I might sometimes like to, I know that I cannot make the whole class about meditation, nor can I simply turn over to them the all-important view (owing to which one is said to be a true follower of the Buddhist path).¹³ That is not what I do in the university venue. Although meditation is intriguing to students, it is not the main focus of my class.

The main focus is on the Teachings, or *Dharma*, of the Buddha; on what sets it apart from other traditions and what constitutes its principal ideas. I present these as best I can with the aid of Rahula (1974) and Harvey (1990), Nhat Hanh¹⁴ and others, and through careful unpacking of key Buddhist Sanskrit and Pali terminology. We are together exploring (1) “what the Buddha taught”; and (2) how what he taught was interpreted and expanded over time and in different cultural regions. In doing this, I see myself as a philosopher, philologist, and historian. I ask students to take the time to ponder meaning(s) and to try to discern what might be fundamental and enduring about Buddhist thought.

Students in this course are asked to read as well as to ponder and also to write. Written assignments include essays on key doctrines and on contextual history: for example, I might ask students to “Give a careful explication of the Four Noble Truths”; or, to “Describe in some detail how specific details of the Buddha’s ‘Life’ explain the origin of key notions articulated in his First Sermon.” And, because I enjoy narrative so much and view it as such an excellent way of engaging students, I also always assign at least one essay in which students are asked to imagine themselves as an actual person in the Buddha’s

time and to create a narrative based upon that. An example of this type of assignment follows:

Imagine yourself as a 6th century B.C.E. Indian woman (whether young or old, daughter, wife, widow, etc.). One day, a Buddhist nun appears in your village or town teaching the Buddha's Doctrine and inviting you to join the Order. *What would be your response? Why?* This question is designed to invite your *creativity*, as well as to help you to *bring together* much of the material we've covered thus far. It is designed, therefore, to have you do *three* distinct things:

1. To portray and comment upon a given woman's social situation;
2. To deftly summarize the Buddha's main teaching; and
3. To react to the Teaching's attractiveness—or unattractiveness—given the circumstances *you* have *initially* posited.

Make sure your essay addresses *all three* of the above.

After getting their creative juices engaged—giving their chief character a name, an age, a familial relationship, and so on—students usually delight in this exercise; and they have produced some remarkably fine narratives.

Throughout the course, I ask students to seek to formulate ever-more precise expressions of the heart of Buddhist Dharma. "Compassion," some say; "Wisdom," say others. I sometimes lead them in a short recitation of the *Dhammapada's* verse 183: "To do no harm. To practice virtue. To purify the mind. This the Buddhas teaching."



Teaching Tibetan Buddhism

The course description I last used when I taught my Tibetan Buddhism seminar read as follows:

For centuries Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism have held an allure and mystique for Westerners that is akin to the magical kingdom of Shangri-la. This course will explore the realities as well as the myths of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism. We shall survey the geographical, cultural and religious landscape of Tibet prior to the advent of Buddhism and, thereafter, focus upon the introduction of Buddhism and its subsequent development there. We shall attempt to plumb the complex interface of religion, culture and politics as practiced within the Tibetan context

as well as to glean an appreciation of the distinctly Tibetan flavor of Buddhist tantric theory and practice. In order to do the latter, we shall draw both upon a number of Tibetan biographies as well as specific Tibetan Buddhist rituals. Lastly, we shall look at the contemporary situation of Tibetans today.

The description sets forth a pretty tall order and promises a great deal for a group of students who can neither spell nor pronounce most Tibetan terms. Still, they know about the allure. While they probably have not read—or seen—*Lost Horizon*,¹⁵ many have gone to concerts by the Beastie Boys¹⁶ and watched the Dalai Lama on YouTube.

In former years I'd had to piece together a number of disparate readings to cover the broad sweep of Tibetan religious and political history but, more recently, thanks to the work of John Powers, I could assign a single “textbook” for the course—Powers’s *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* ([1995] 2007)¹⁷—along with more specialized readings. These readings are primarily life stories and narratives. We read, for example, the biography of the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan figures in John Avedon’s *In Exile from the Land of Snows* (1984). I pair an ancient *rnam-thar* (of Yeshe Tsogyal)¹⁸ with the life of a contemporary nun, Ani Pachen’s *Sorrow Mountain* (2000). To discuss the issues of “othering” and “exoticization” of Tibet and Tibetans, I have students read James Hilton’s *Lost Horizon* and Don Lopez Jr.’s *Prisoners of Shangri-la* (1999). I make sure that we read a large number of essays written by Tibetans¹⁹ themselves in order to counter the purely Western gaze. We read and discuss *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*²⁰ and then watch a film about its practice in modern-day Ladakh.²¹ We read about *maṅḍalas* of various sorts, then all take turns constructing and offering an actual *maṅḍala*.²² This seminar is both more theoretical and more hands-on than the larger, “Introduction to Buddhism” course. It is where the mythic must come to life in order to be understood: in tantric-speak, where the “secret” and “inner” worlds must touch the “outer.”²³ My task is to explain to students and to show them how this threefold structuring and ordering of the tantric materials operates.

I find this last remark almost confessional in nature and it is here, where I sometimes hesitate. I know something that the students do not and my task is to share that knowledge with them, at least in a general and nonspecific way. However, sometimes this means share it with them even though they have not—as dictated by the tradition’s tantric requirements—received the proper initiations to render them ready to receive it. What am I to do then? Of course, the sharing of knowledge is exactly what all good teachers do; and, generally speaking, we all also know that knowledge is best when it is drawn-out of

the student themselves and is thus “discovered” rather than simply handed over. However, the idea of sharing “with the *uninitiated*” is the source of my conundrum here and it is a sensitive, and intimate, issue for me. It is here that the theory and controversy surrounding the “insider/outsider” model in contemporary religious studies²⁴ actually has some teeth for me, since it is clearly by virtue of my quasi-“insider”²⁵ status that I have gained, and am capable of sharing, this particular information and knowledge. But scholarly detachment is the rule within the academy. Yet, scholarly detachment here would almost certainly ensure that my knowledge of the subject matter is incomplete or inaccurate. Should I not teach this because of the manner in which I learned it—namely, at the feet of a lama?

I am a teacher within a university setting. I am neither a lama nor a guru to my students. In the Tibetan traditions, a lama is one who can show her heart-disciples the “three kindnesses” of (1) teaching the *sūtras* and their commentaries; (2) offering sound oral instructions on the *Tantras*; and (3) giving empowerments.²⁶ While I may be able to offer instructions and commentary, I certainly cannot impart *spiritual empowerments* (or, *dbang*) to my students in the way that experienced lamas can. Nor is that “kindness” the same kindness that occurs in academe. And yet, I take heart in remembering that when I won Wesleyan’s Binswanger Prize for excellence in teaching in 2003, the plaque that I was given announced that it was due to my “ability to make learning a *shared* process” and that I “open (the) eyes (of my students) to a culture far different from our own.” It continued, movingly, by remarking that “Having lived the transformative message of Tibetan Buddhism, you *teach from the heart*.” Did they really mean it? I wondered. Is there, can there be, true appreciation—within the academy—for this?



The “Scholar-Practitioner”

Not long ago, when two of my colleagues and I were interviewing a prospective job candidate via Skype, a savvy young job-seeker who had done her homework for the interview asked me, “How do you manage teaching Tibetan Buddhism when you also practice? Do you ever find that to be *problematic*?” I responded, “Well, what I teach is a form of Buddhism known for its esoteric character. It would be impossible for me to teach it—or to know anything about it, really—without knowing something about its internal workings and practices.” The candidate seemed satisfied. What was especially of note, however, was the surprise and seemingly new insight on the part of my two

colleagues. Immediately after we had disconnected from the interview, one said, “Jan, that was an *amazing* response! *How did you come up with that?*” It was as if she had seen and understood what it was that I did at the university for the very first time. “I simply told her the truth,” I replied, “It wasn’t as if I had to make something up!” Again, the usually unspoken suspicion—that I might not really belong on a university faculty—had surfaced.

A few years before, while conducting a departmental self-evaluation, the department’s chair was attempting to categorize what each of us faculty members contributed to the department. Some offered theoretical expertise, others a more “thematic” approach. When it came to me, and my courses on Buddhism, I was deemed a contributor of the “experiential” approach! It seemed clear to me at the time that this odd moniker was intended to mean that what I did was something other—and, probably, something less—than “academic” and “scholarly.” Sadly, over the course of my nearly four decades of teaching, most members of my department and of my university’s administration have maintained the narrow-minded and misguided misperception that scholarly engagement within a religious studies department—if possible at all—necessitates complete objectivity from the subject matter, even downright (though often denied) hostility toward it. Any affinity for one’s area of expertise is therefore viewed with suspicion. Furthermore, as a teacher of a religious tradition which espouses the importance of one’s own experience, my subject matter, Buddhism, is doubly anathema to them.

In the fall of 1969, I had the great good fortune of traveling to Nepal and meeting Lama Thubten Yeshe there. I went, as part of that counter-cultural movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, seeking spiritual awakening and healing for the traumatic effects wrought by the legacy of slavery and an early childhood spent in the Jim Crow South. I carried an abundance of low self-esteem, feeling hurt, anger, and unworthiness, and I sought relief. I loved Lama Yeshe from the instant I met him, but my pride would not let me admit it. He sent me for a time to study with his guru in India, a task befitting me, I thought, since I had studied physics and philosophy at Cornell (pride is often the other side of insecurity). But Lama Yeshe nourished and encouraged me, showering me with compassion and extolling my intelligence. Over the course of the next fifteen years, while I studied Tibetan and Sanskrit and translated a work that served as the basis of my Ph.D. dissertation, Lama Yeshe helped me to build confidence in myself, to accept who I was, and to see my basic goodness (my *Buddha-nature*). No academic degree can equal that!²⁷ And so, my career as a Buddhist scholar was launched.

Charles Prebish claims to have been the earliest American scholar to coin the phrase “scholar-practitioner” to refer to “professors, who, in addition to

having sophisticated academic credentials in Buddhist studies, also happen to be practicing Buddhists.”²⁸ Prebish discussed his own “coming out” as a Buddhist to his department head who, thereafter, Prebish noted, “no longer took my academic scholarship seriously” (Prebish 2006: 67). José Cabezón, former Tibetan Buddhist monk and holder of a PhD in Buddhist studies from the University of Wisconsin, is quoted by Prebish as describing why scholar-practitioners are viewed negatively. Cabezón remarked: “One of the prevailing views in the study of religion is that ‘Critical distance from the object of intellectual analysis is necessary. Buddhists, by virtue of their religious commitment, lack such critical distance from Buddhism. Hence, Buddhists are *never* good Buddhologists.’”²⁹ Of course, as Prebish rightly noted, this is a stereotype, as well as a faulty argument. Even so, it exists; and it produces consequences.

Religious studies professors are, ironically, often the very individuals who are most hostile to any form of religion. Perhaps defensive about their profession, it seems to me they often confuse “critical, scholarly distance” with “arrogance” and “condescension.” (I often wonder what led them into the field!) As a consequence of their perspective, they never really get to know their subject matter. So intent on de-constructing, they can never quite construct, see anything as being constructive, or even allow the possibility that anything might be spiritually meaningful. It is bad enough that this is their opinion and perspective; it is much worse, however, when this is what they teach their students.

As I have noted above, I try to make a distinction between what is appropriate for the classroom and what is appropriate for the dharma hall or meditation room.³⁰ None of my Buddhism courses is designed to convert students to Buddhism or to guide them in a specific spiritual lineage as if I were their guru or Dharma teacher. I recognize that I teach, primarily, within a university—not a Dharma center—setting. But I don’t hate, or belittle, or disparage Buddhism. And this fact comes through to my students.

I had answered the young job candidate honestly. Had I not studied with and learned from a true Tibetan guru about the internal (outer, inner, and secret) meanings of tantric texts and practices, I would have an inaccurate and faulty sense of what they are about. I might think, for example, that *chöd* practices are violent and sadistic sacrificial rites—as some Western authors have actually described them. I might think that mangy dogs are capable of offering insight, rather than seeing that the dogs are markers of moments of insights, as *ḍākinī*, or wisdom-beings breaking suddenly into consciousness.³¹ I might think that Tibetan *maṇḍalas* are only pretty art forms. In fact, I know a number of scholars of Tibetan Buddhism who do not know much about the

internal logic or workings of Tibetan tantric practice and would never dream of asking for, or practicing, any form of Tibetan tantric meditation. These scholars are knowledgeable about other aspects of Tibetan culture; they are adept at the languages and even at describing certain rituals in exacting detail. Yet they have often entirely misread and consequently misunderstood the meaning of a given text or ritual precisely because they tend to approach, and to read, literally what is intended to be read—and what is actually operating—symbolically.

The history of the clash of cultures and misconceptions resulting from Tibetan Buddhism's various encounters with its Western interpreters is full of examples of this phenomenon.³² Reading literally is a characteristic of the Western mind and its penchant for left-brain functioning; but many, if not most, non-Western cultures—and certainly non-Western religious traditions—"read" differently. And while bridging this divide may be challenging, it is not impossible. Some people can actually see and allow for the possibility of more than one level of experience operating at one time!

Several different causes and conditions came together in the late 1990s which ultimately resulted in my writing a memoir. I would never have thought to do this on my own; I did not feel old enough or wise enough. And yet, after several persistent requests to do so by an editor at Doubleday publishers and the urging from friends, I took up the challenge. It was an intense, emotion-filled and difficult three-year project that in the end was far more rewarding than I could ever have imagined when I began. I spent the time remembering, going back over key events in my life, and weighing and reflecting upon them. In discovering and retracing early memories from my life, I found my true self. And I began to let go of old wounds.

In the book, I recognized and spoke openly about the crippling effects of racism; and I saw and spoke openly about the redemptive benefits of spiritual practice, whether Baptist or Buddhist. Titled *Dreaming Me: Black, Baptist, and Buddhist—One Woman's Spiritual Journey*,³³ the book was originally published in 2001 and received starred reviews from both *Library Journal* and *Publishers Weekly*. One review remarked that I "could be the first African-American Buddhist feminist guru to be embraced by reading groups across America." A good bit of hyperbole there!

Writing the memoir was good for me on several levels. First, in order to write it, I had to convince myself that writing a book about me was a worthy project to undertake, especially within an academic environment. Second, after writing it, the book's success made my religious studies colleagues—at least outwardly—show a bit more respect for what I did (whether they actually felt this or not). Third, I guess one could say that, in *Dreaming Me*, I "came out" as being a practitioner, someone who cares about religion and religious

studies, someone who doesn't mind the appellation, "scholar-practitioner." I had written a number of other more "scholarly" works before the memoir, but it was the memoir which seemed to bring real recognition. Still, my day-to-day life within academia did not change very much; I continued to teach my courses as I had before and to give outside lectures, albeit in more and more impressive and distinguished venues. I attributed this to my age, rather than to any particular recognition within the guild of Religious Studies, or within the Dharma-world for that matter.

Then, in the mid-summer of 2011, I found myself among two hundred other "Buddhist Teachers"³⁴ at a conference held at the Garrison Institute in New York. For the four days of the conference I happily joined with friends and colleagues for meals, and discussion groups, and evening chats. But it was only near the conference's end that I could put into words the feeling I had been trying to capture throughout those days: only I and a very few others were academics. Indeed, I counted only one other university professor and she, unlike myself, was now retired. What I finally experienced was a sense of grateful recognition for being included among Buddhist, not Buddhist studies, teachers. I had been included and invited to that particular conference because I was considered to be a practitioner and a Dharma teacher. (Perhaps presciently, I had titled one of the chapters in *Dreaming Me*, "Teaching as My Practice.") I was, indeed, a "scholar-practitioner." And that felt pretty good.

Notes

1. Presumably, this means meditation, though there are many other forms of Buddhist practice.
2. Among many others on this topic, see remarks by Reynolds 2002: 6–7.
3. Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut. Named after the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, the school was initially affiliated with the Methodist Church but became non-affiliated early in its history. I believe there may still be a sense of defensiveness about the earlier church connection. One need only read the number of times the term "secular institution" is repeated throughout the school's various advertisements and mission statement to get an idea of this.
4. I save explorations of Heinz Bechert and others for more advanced seminars. For this course, the dates 563–483 B.C.E. are functional.
5. For Milarepa's life, I have most often relied on the English translation by Lobsang Lhalungpa, though there is now available the less Tibetan language-laden translation by Andrew Quintman (Penguin Books, 2010). For the life of Naropa, I use Guenther 1963.
6. This wonderful little text was first published in 1959.

7. I am in agreement here with Lewis's assessment of the value of narrative as articulated in his essay, "Representation of Buddhism in Undergraduate Teaching: The Centrality of Ritual and Story Narratives."
8. Much of my work over the years has had this primary message. My translation of the early dGe-lugs Mahamudra siddhas, *Enlightened Beings; The Ganden Oral Tradition* (1995), attempted to make this point. Roughly two-thirds of that text is comprised of annotations which are intended to show these *siddhas* to be actual historical figures who practiced. I sometimes guide students to envision themselves as investigative reporters during the time of ancient figures, to put them on the ground in former times and other cultures. This method has had good results.
9. *Zen Buddhism: In Search of Self* is a 2007 film, 62 minutes long, produced by Gong Jae Sung, which chronicles a ninety-day gathering of two dozen Zen Buddhist nuns observing Winter Zen Retreat at Baek Hung Temple in South Korea.
10. See *Dhamma Brothers*, a 2007 documentary film directed by Jenny Phillips about a meditation program held at Donaldson Correctional Facility near Bessemer, Alabama.
11. Traditional Buddhism says that there are three types of wisdom: that which arises from hearing and study (*sruta-mayi-prajñā*), that which arises from contemplation (*cinta-mayi-prajñā*), and that which arises from meditation (or, *bhāvanamayi-prajñā*). In my classes, I try to provide the space for the first two of these activities.
12. Over the years, I have tried various means to accomplish this. Early on, I offered to guide students who had completed the first half of the course in a Tibetan practice. I "prepped" all the students for the practice during class but did not make attending the ceremony or doing the practice a requirement of the course. I then invited all interested students to come together for a special abbreviated *rjes-nang*, or "permission to practice" ceremony. After that ceremony, we met as a group once each week outside the classroom until the end of the semester. After the first few weeks, the number of students attending these sessions usually trailed off; students wanted to know what the practice(s) were like; but not everyone found them captivating, especially as the schedules of other extracurricular events picked up. In those early years, I lectured a bit on the theory of Buddhist meditation in class and "practiced" with a few students outside of class.

More recently, I have incorporated into the actual class a week or week and a half of lectures and discussions which focus solely on the varieties of Buddhist meditation wherein we all briefly "try them out" during class time. Students read selections from Peter Harvey, Ayya Khema, Thich Nhat Hanh, and others, and we then devote a period of class time to "Practice." It turns out that this "sampling" technique has spurred much engagement in and, subsequently, outside the classroom.

13. An interesting account of what constitutes this Buddhist “view” is provided by Khyentse Norbu Rinpoche in his *What Makes You Not a Buddhist* (2008).
14. I use both Thich Nhat Hanh’s *Being Peace* (1987) and a hefty selection from his *Old Path, White Clouds* (1991), which is a composite narrative of the “life” of the Buddha.
15. The novel, *Lost Horizon*, was authored by James Hilton and first published in 1933. The book was made into a film directed by Frank Capra in 1937.
16. Adam Yauch of the group is known for his song “Bodhisattva Vow,” which became the anthem of concerts for the Students for a Free Tibet organization.
17. A smaller, “Concise Introduction” appeared in 2008.
18. I use the translation by Tarthang Tulku and Jane Wilhelms called *Mother of Knowledge* (1983).
19. Fortunately, in the past few years, a lot have become available. Works by Jamyang Norbu, Tsering Namgyal, Tenzin Tsundue, and Dagwab Kyabgon Rinpoche provide useful counterbalances to Western misperceptions. A useful collection of such essays can be found in Dodin and Rather 2001.
20. I like Trungpa Tulku and Fremantle’s translation and commentary in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1975).
21. See the 2004 DVD, *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, directed by Hiroaki Mota and Barrie McLean.
22. The short text I use for guiding us here in the construction and offering of a *maṇḍala* is taken from Sermey Geshe Lobsang Tharchin’s *A Commentary on Guru Yoga and Offering of the Mandala* (1987).
23. According to Tantric rules of interpretation, all texts and rituals are said to consist of and to operate on three levels, to wit, the outer, inner, and secret levels, and may therefore be read and interpreted on these three distinct levels. See a fuller account of these three in the “Introduction” to my *Enlightened Beings; the Ganden Oral Tradition* (1995: 3–29).
24. For a collection of essays on this subject by eminent scholars, see McCutcheon 1999.
25. I harbor no delusions that my few years of study with Tibetans qualify me fully to officiate or to assume the role of a qualified guru or lama. Still, Lama Yeshe entrusted me with certain ritual and practice instructions which, he said, were “to be used in your capacity as a teacher.”
26. There are various translations of the lama’s capabilities or “kindnesses” (*bKa’ drin*). In a forthcoming book, *The Sacred Sites of the Dalai Lamas*, Glenn Mullin calls the three the “legacies of a master” and defines them as: “giving spiritual teachings that reveal the essential thought of the Buddhas, leading discussions that dispel mistaken dogma, and composing texts that fill with delight the fortunate beings that love profound realizations” (82). A teacher must be a master at teaching, inquiry and debate, and composition. Some of these skills are also

- enjoined by the university upon its faculty. But spiritual empowerment is the province of an experienced spiritual master.
27. In this way my meeting and studying with Lama Yeshe was quite different than the encounter that Donald Lopez Jr. discusses in his provocative essay, “Foreigner at the Lama’s Feet” (1995). There he notes that most of us went to the lamas’ feet seeking our PhDs. Lopez develops a number of intriguing ideas in this essay about what he calls “four moments of urgency” in our encounters with Tibetan refugees, about working with a lama as with “a native scholar who was made to serve as both informant and guru,” and about how, in order to gain our degrees, we had to render the teacher’s voice and words secondary to the printed words of our newly created texts.
 28. See Prebish 2006: 64. In fact, the phrase is fairly commonplace within the various Buddhist traditions. For example, as Prebish notes here, *gantha-dhura*, or the “vocation of books,” was one name for early Buddhist monks who upheld and valued teaching above practice. In the Tibetan tradition, especially within the dGe-lugs-pa school, *mkhas-grub* is an often-used form of respect. The term literally means, “a learned master” (*mkhas*) who is also an accomplished practitioner (*grub*), as in the name of one of Tsongkhapa’s greatest disciples, mKhas-grub-rje.
 29. Prebish 2006: 67. (Spoken like a true J. Z. Smithian!)
 30. Three articles exploring this theme are found in the *Journal of Global Buddhism*: Makransky 2008; Reader 2008; Williams 2008.
 31. I prefer not to single out here the particular scholars and their misinterpretations I refer to above. They know who they are.
 32. We all know about the infamous L. Austine Waddell, for example, and his tirades against what he mistakenly called “Lamaism.” For more on the issue of the West’s encounters with Tibetan Buddhism, see Lopez 1999.
 33. The memoir was first published in 2001, by Riverhead, under the title *Dreaming Me: An African American Woman’s Spiritual Journey*. In 2008, a slightly revised and expanded edition was published by Wisdom Publications as *Dreaming Me; Black, Baptist, and Buddhist—One Woman’s Spiritual Journey*.
 34. The title is revealing, for it was not a scholarly convocation of Buddhist studies scholars and academics, but rather a gathering of teachers, from Dharma centers around the world.

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Teaching Buddhist History to Buddhist Practitioners

Rita M. Gross

Introduction

For many years, I taught Buddhism to non-Buddhists at a regional state university, whether as part of my world religions course, in a semester-long course on Buddhism, or in units on Buddhism in courses on Japanese and Chinese religions. What I could actually communicate about Buddhism in those courses was quite superficial and the teaching experience was rather unsatisfactory. However, at the midpoint of my career as a university professor in the field of the comparative study of religion, I also began to function as a Buddhist dharma teacher and since my retirement from the university, I have been teaching very widely as a senior dharma teacher (Tib. *lopon*, Skt. *ācārya*). These two teaching venues offer interesting points of similarity and difference. The main difference is that dharma teaching is much more fulfilling, both because the students are genuinely interested in and committed to what they are studying, and because I am able to teach at a much less superficial level. (Granted, had I been able to teach more specialized courses at a university, this contrast would not be so complete.) The similarity is that, despite the differing levels of student commitment, as a dharma teacher, I have had to deal with issues of literalism and fundamentalism that are similar to those with which many university professors must deal, though those difficulties are more likely to be encountered by someone teaching biblical studies than by the Buddhist studies professor. Very few university professors of Buddhist studies have such a comparative template for their reflections on the experience of teaching Buddhism.

This foray into dharma teaching also takes another issue to a new level. Previously, those of us who have allegiance both as insiders and as outsiders, to both an Asian dharma tradition and to the values of academic scholarship, have mainly defended our abilities to function in the academy, proving that our participation in a dharma tradition did not wreck our scholarship. Indeed, many scholars hid their dharma affiliations, at least from their academic colleagues. Dissatisfied with that solution, others have argued that the academy needs the contributions of well-trained scholar-practitioners to represent the dharma traditions accurately and fairly in the academy. I have contributed publications in both these areas. However, my work as a dharma teacher brings up a third possible relationship between being an academic and being a practitioner. In my work as a dharma teacher, I often reverse the arrow of influence, exploring how the modern academic study of religion is relevant to Buddhism as practiced by its Western students and how it changes views commonly held by dharma practitioners. Thus, I explore in this chapter what happens when an academically trained university professor who is also a Buddhist practitioner becomes a dharma teacher and takes her academic training and perspectives into dharma teaching. This exploration will focus on my experiences teaching what I call “an accurate and non-sectarian history of Buddhism” in Buddhist contexts—Buddhist history for Buddhist practitioners—for shorthand.

For readers not familiar with how Western Buddhist sanghas teach Buddhism to their own members, it is necessary to report something about the usual curriculum at a Western Buddhist center. Students receive very little overall instruction about Buddhism as a whole; they only study their own lineage and, in some cases, are discouraged from receiving teachings from other teachers, whether verbal or written. There is almost no study of Buddhist history and what little there is focuses only on the particular lineage of Buddhism with which the center is affiliated. Most of that meager training in Buddhist history is narrowly sectarian, justifying whatever school the center belongs to as “what the Buddha really taught.” About other forms of Buddhism, it would be taught either that they did not receive the Buddha’s full teachings or that they erroneously accepted newly minted scriptures as *Buddhavacana*, “the words of the Buddha.” The teachers and directors of these centers justify their choices about what to teach by claiming that they are teaching spirituality and that accurate understandings of Buddhist history or empathetic appreciation for other forms of Buddhism are irrelevant to the primary goal of aiding students aiming for deep spiritual transformation and even enlightenment. They also often claim that students will become confused if they hear different teachings, or doctrines that contradict what they are being taught at their dharma center. In addition, most dharma teachers are completely lacking in

any academic training in Buddhist history and comparative studies in religion. In their defense, it must be said that it is very difficult for a non-academic practitioner to study Buddhist history.



Buddhist History for Buddhist Practitioners

What began as a simple service project morphed into a major concern as I have discovered that certain questions of great interest to practitioners, such as the origins of Mahāyāna Buddhism, are not yet well understood by scholars of Buddhist history. I have also discovered, somewhat to my shock, that Western practitioners of Buddhism can be as naively literalist in their readings of traditional Buddhist narratives as any Christian fundamentalist. Thus, my project quickly took on a second agenda: trying to reconcile students' unconscious and inevitable immersion in the paradigm engendered by the European Enlightenment with their commitments to Buddhism. This reconciliation must involve a way for Buddhists to value traditional narratives without falling into textual literalism and fundamentalism. This second aspect of my project will be the major focus of this chapter.

For the past five years (2007–11), I have taught a very serious course on Buddhist history at the Lotus Garden meditation center, the Western center of Her Eminence Jetsun Khandro Rinpoche (<http://www.lotusgardens.org/>). I have also taught similar shorter courses at various Zen and Vipassana centers. In addition, I write and teach online for widely circulated popular Buddhist periodicals. In this enterprise, I am blessed by the unfailing support of my teacher, Jetsun Khandro Rinpoche, who continues to sponsor the course at Lotus Garden and often reminds resistant Western students that considering a scholarly version of Buddhist history is relevant and important. This Lotus Garden project began with an email to Khandro Rinpoche in 2005 in which I outlined the project in general. Some weeks later, in India, I asked her what she thought of the project and she replied that she liked it. On the spur of the moment, I asked her, “Should we try it at Lotus Garden?” She thought for a moment and said “Yes.” Some days later, at a restaurant in Delhi, we again agreed that such a course would be taught. I went back to my table and she went to hers. Then, mindful that most Tibetans believe that the *Heart Sūtra* narrates a historical event that happened during the lifetime of the historical Buddha and knowing that I would be teaching that Mahāyāna Buddhism developed many centuries after the Buddha's death, I approached her again.¹ “Rinpoche,” I said, “I have to be sure that you understand that most Tibetans

would think that much of what I will be teaching is heresy.” She laughed heartily and replied, “Oh, that’s good for us. It will make us think!”

In the second year of the course, I began a serious discussion of the historical origins of Mahāyāna Buddhism, unequivocally teaching that Nāgārjuna did not retrieve the Mahāyāna teachings from the realm of the *nāgas*,² but that they gradually emerged some centuries after the historical Buddha’s life and death. Therefore, the *Heart Sūtra* cannot be a historical narrative; instead, it is a story. I also tried to help students understand that a story does not have to be empirical history to have religious and spiritual value. But one of the other senior teachers objected greatly, saying that since I had physically stood at the spot where it is said that the *Heart Sūtra* was first spoken, how could I doubt the historical accuracy of the narrative . . . as if my standing at the spot where an event allegedly took place proves that the alleged event did take place in empirical space and time. She also told me that she thought I should desist completely from teaching the history course because it was improper even to bring academic methods into a shrine room. After the course, one of the residents left the center because he now thought that Buddhist stories were no “truer” than the many Christian stories he had previously rejected as “untrue.”

Over the years, objections have diminished significantly, but they resurface whenever we encounter a narrative about an event that is probably not a historical event—one recordable by a camcorder—had they existed. Students seem to be impervious to the suggestion that the relevance of these stories is quite independent of whether or not they record empirical events. I have tried several analogies to try to help them appreciate stories as something other than historical documentaries. As I have thought more about the exuberant miracle stories so abundant in later Indian Buddhist literature, I have come to believe that in their own context they functioned much as science fiction does in our context. At the same time, they can both entertain and present profound messages, even while we understand thoroughly that such narratives do not portray things that can happen empirically in our world at this time. Although some students really appreciated the analogy, others were furious, claiming that I was again belittling Buddhist narratives by using the term “fiction” when referring to them.



Why Literalism and Fundamentalism?

What is going on here? Western students of Buddhism do not realize how thoroughly they have imbibed the values of the European Enlightenment, especially its definition of truth as something that must be empirically

verifiable, which is actually a very materialist understanding of truth. But because such students have also decided that Buddhism is “true,” they then draw the conclusion that anything narrated in Buddhist traditional stories must have happened in empirical space and time just as the texts describe it, rather than in the realm of imagination and symbol. People who do not take seriously stories of talking serpents and apples become weak-kneed when confronted by a traditional story about texts hidden in the realm of water-dwelling half-human, half-serpent creatures (the *nāgas*). Probably it is because they do not know a way to take seriously stories about talking serpents in the garden of Eden that they feel they must literally believe in stories about *nāgas* if that is what their Tibetan teachers have told them. They have no avenues to assess something as relevant and worthy of consideration except for empiricism and its total reliance on material facts alone as trustworthy and valuable.

While empirical methods and scientific materialism have greatly improved our way of life in many respects, the great loser in this process has been any ability to appreciate symbols, metaphors, and analogies. To many people, symbols are much less convincing than empirically verifiable facts, which is why they insist that anything valuable in a religion must be a fact, not a “mere” symbol. The motto seems to be “either it’s a fact or it’s meaningless. Don’t talk to me about symbolism!” Perhaps because I am dealing with Western Buddhists, it is not surprising that I encounter among Buddhists exactly the same attitudes about story and history that my university students displayed. Although technically I was supposed to be teaching Asian religions, I think I spent almost as much time helping them appreciate Christian stories in a nonliteral way.

But eventually, for many people, such allegiance to fact alone as true and valuable means that they entirely lose confidence in their faith tradition when they are no longer able to take its stories literally, when they can no longer believe that Jesus literally rose from the dead or that the historical Buddha himself taught the *Heart Sūtra* and then hid Mahāyāna teachings among the *nāgas* for four hundred years. Literalism and fundamentalism are toxic to a deep and profound religious life, at least among those who also live by the paradigm engendered by the European Enlightenment, which by now is most of the world.

Thus, for me as a dharma teacher, one of my most urgent tasks is to help students learn how to take traditional stories seriously without taking them literally. That is to say, I need to help them learn how to live in *both* the paradigms of the European Enlightenment and of Buddhism, without subjugating one to the other. To do this, with Buddhists as with my university students,

I often rely upon one of the wisest statements about history and story that I have ever encountered, spoken by the native American elder Black Elk. He narrated one of the Lakota's most important stories, a story about how the sacred pipe first came to the people. This story is filled with events that are difficult to take literally after we have plunged into the paradigm of the European Enlightenment, such as women turning into buffalos. Then he said, "This they tell and whether it happened so or not, I do not know; but if you think about it you can see that it is true" (Neihardt 1961: 5).

The main point made in this simple statement is that truth is not always about empirical facts or observable events, contrary to literalist suppositions. Truth can be revealed through deep contemplation of traditional stories and statements. Thus, whether or not a story could have been captured by a camcorder as an empirical fact does not really matter. Its truth lies in its symbolic meanings, found in the realms of imagination and contemplation. Black Elk himself was skeptical about the narrative as a factual account, even though much of his spiritual life was based on the symbolism and rituals associated with the sacred pipe, whose origin is narrated in this story. Thus, the same story could be both true and false at the same time—false as a factual account of an empirical event, but true as the symbolic charter for one's spirituality. Only the prestige accorded solely to facts in the paradigm of the European Enlightenment makes people think otherwise.

I then use this insight to maintain a strict distinction between story and history, insisting that people not conflate the two. This division is foreign to traditional religious narratives, in which the two are thoroughly mixed up and story slides into history. More than anything, this distinction is difficult for dharma students being asked for the first time to be alert to their differences. Modern history is a scientific, empirically based discipline. Stories are simply stories, not science or history. That science and history have such prestige in our current culture is not a good reason to try to force traditional narratives into that mold. Some narratives can be both story and history, while others are stories but not history. Within this framework, we can appreciate both story and history, searching for an accurate history at the same time as we appreciate the symbolic truth of traditional narratives that simply are not historically accurate. Although there is initial, and often continuing, resistance to this distinction, many dharma students will eventually accept it, so long as I do not use for "story" the term that scholars of religion would prefer—"myth." I have found that no matter how many times I explain the accurate meaning of this term, its popular connotations overwhelm students; they simply cannot shake the negative implications of the term "myth" from their minds. The

remainder of this chapter will demonstrate some of the ways I use the “story” and “history” distinction to teach Buddhist history for Buddhist practitioners as an academically trained scholar-practitioner.



The Riddle of Modern Historical Studies and Traditional Stories

Proponents of religions have had a very hard time adjusting to the paradigm shift engendered by the European Enlightenment with its emphasis on rationality and empirical, public verification of claims. In Western circles, this difficulty has usually been seen as a conflict between religion and science, most vividly played out in controversies about evolution versus creationism that regularly plague school policies and politics in the United States. Buddhism, however, has many fewer problems with science, given that it already envisions a universe of endless space and time filled with multiple worlds inhabited by diverse creatures. The Dalai Lama’s keen interest in and approval of modern science increases this impression that science and Buddhism can easily get along. Regarding Buddhism and science, the Dalai Lama is famous for his claim that “if scientific analysis were conclusively to demonstrate certain claims in Buddhism to be false, then we must accept the findings of science and abandon those claims” (His Holiness, the Dalai Lama 2005: 3).

There has been far less discussion of the compatibility or conflict between traditional Buddhist narratives and modern historical study, perhaps because no one with the Dalai Lama’s stature has taken up this issue. But I make the same claim for the relationship between modern historical studies and Buddhism that the Dalai Lama makes for the relationship between Buddhism and science. I would suggest, however, that the implications of modern methods of historical study are more serious than modern science, certainly for Buddhism, and perhaps for all religions. There are at least two ways in which modern historical methods create doubt about some claims commonly made in traditional narratives.

First, the more serious is the way in which modern historical studies demonstrate, or at least claim, that religious texts, practices, and beliefs are the result of human cultural creativity and evolution. They are products of historical development, not of supernatural intervention into history. In other words, religious texts, practices, and beliefs do not drop into the human realm, fully formed and nicely bound between two covers, from some other realm. Second

is the more superficial doubt that involves skepticism about the miracle stories so common in traditional religious narratives.



History and Revelation

Religions usually resist claims that their forms—their verbally or visually expressed beliefs and their rituals—are due to human creativity. Exponents of every religion at least sometimes claim that its forms derive from a seemingly more authoritative source than human creativity. Even in Buddhism, a non-theistic tradition with no reasonable source for divine revelation, this tendency prevails. In Buddhism that source is often only Tradition, with a capital “T.” Many contemporary Buddhist teachers are as submissive before the authority of Tradition as are believers in revealed religions before the authority of their scriptures. Many times, I have heard teachers claim that we cannot tamper with established forms, sometimes accompanied by a claim that masters of the past were more accomplished than we are and knew what they were doing. That even a non-theistic religion nevertheless relies on an inflexible source for its forms indicates how desperately many humans long to deflect responsibility for their core convictions to some non-human source, or at least some source other than themselves.

However, historical and comparative studies, especially if one studies several religions, make it impossible to resist the conclusion that all religious traditions, without exception, are human attempts to articulate our relationship with our existential situations. For one thing, it is impossible on any rational and universally relevant basis to adjudicate among the many claims competing to be authentic revelations originating from beyond the human realm. In a situation of relative religious and cultural homogeneity, which prevailed in most of the world until after global exploration began in earnest in the sixteenth century, most were much less aware of these competing claims to be authentic revelation. It is now impossible to avoid awareness of religious diversity and the theological adjustments that all religions need to make in the light of that diversity. But one of the great advantages of living in contemporary times is the opportunity to make the adjustments such knowledge requires. When thinking about the religions of others, it is very easy to see them as products of human aspirations and foibles; it is egotistical and perverse to exempt one’s own religion from that process. Yet religious people often do just that. I often remember the logic of some of my university students. Their assignment was to apply Black Elk’s statement about sacred narratives to two traditional stories, one familiar and the other

unfamiliar. Students wrote something like: “The Greeks had very illogical stories that they obviously made up, such as that a mare could become pregnant by turning her hindquarters to the wind. Everyone knows that’s impossible. Christians, by contrast, have sensible sacred stories which we didn’t make up, such as that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and had no human father.”

Is Buddhism harmed by giving up claims that its teachings transcend human time and space? I think not. In fact, I would claim such a view is more in accord with foundational Buddhadharma than its alternative. I would support this claim on two counts. First, basic Buddhist teachings, such as all-pervasive impermanence and interdependent origination, do not accord well with the supposition that there are eternal verities capturable in words and concepts. Things, including doctrines and rituals, should be expected to change and those changes come about because of changing constellations of causes and conditions. As taught by Nāgārjuna in his famous work the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās*, even the appearance of a Buddha occurs only by the workings of interdependent origination, by the working of the same processes that govern everything else in our human world, not as the result of something transcendent to that world.

Second, I would claim that Buddhism has always taught something also demonstrated by modern historical studies of religion—all religious forms, the words, concepts, practices, and rituals—are human constructions that are culturally relative. In this regard, I see very little difference between the results of modern historical studies of religion and steep/profound Buddhist teachings. I am always very careful in my precise wording of this point. I have not claimed that there is no ultimate, ineffable, transcendent dimension in human experience; I have claimed that all words, concepts, and so on used to point to it are human constructions and should be held lightly, not taken literally. The great failing of any religion is always to take its own forms too seriously, to claim that they have ultimate rather than relative significance.

Although many Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike often miss the point, in my view, all schools of Buddhism claim that, while teachings and views are necessary and useful tools to be used on the path, ultimately they will be left behind when true insight dawns upon one. Or, as many Buddhists like to say, silence is the ultimate truth—not an uninformed, unpracticed silence, but the silence born of deep contemplation. The silence of not being so attached to words, views, rituals, practices, or any religious forms is ultimately and intensely liberating.



History and Miracles

Most dharma students have enough understanding of emptiness and the two truths that eventually they do concede that Buddhist forms are the result of historical processes, not of extra-human intervention into history. Nevertheless and strangely, this understanding does not always cut their attachment to traditional miracle stories. Many times, I have encountered dharma students who regard themselves as very good dharma students because of their belief in any and all traditional stories. They often regard themselves as much better students than those who evaluate such stories more critically.

Buddhist texts are filled with narratives that are as difficult to believe in literally as either stories of mares becoming pregnant by turning their hindquarters to the wind or of a human child being conceived without a human father—or of women turning into buffalos, as in the Black Elk narrative. Nevertheless, miracle stories are very appealing to many religious people, who will believe any miracle story from their own tradition, even while they would ridicule the same basic story when found in a different tradition. Such believers especially rely on miracle stories to prove the “truth” of their own religions. Countless young university students thought they had defeated me in debate when they proclaimed, “But you can tell that Christianity is the true religion because Jesus performed miracles.” They were easily set back, in turn, by apprising them of the fact that miracle stories are a dime a dozen, widespread in all religions and, therefore, prove nothing. Given the universality of miracle stories in religions, how could one claim that the miracle stories of one’s own tradition prove its truth unless one is willing to grant that all miracle stories found in all religions also prove their truths?

So much for students, whether beginning university students or dharma students. I find it much more problematic when a well-known and highly regarded dharma teacher regards alleged performance of a miracle as supreme proof of the cogency of a philosophical position. Recently, I attended a program on the teachings of Chandrakīrti, one of the foremost commentators on Nāgārjuna’s teachings on *shūnyatā*, “emptiness.” Time after time, the teacher would summarize all the philosophical, rational demonstrations for the cogency of Nāgārjuna’s teachings on emptiness and then try to clinch his arguments by citing a story of how Chandrakīrti once extracted milk from a painting of a cow! But if teachings on emptiness were not cogent, I certainly could not be persuaded to believe in them by a story about being able to milk a painted cow, especially given how many non-painted cows I have milked! And if I were to be required to believe in the story of milking a painted cow as fact, that would make me less likely, not more likely, to give credence to Buddhist teachings on emptiness. (Fortunately, teachings on emptiness are so cogent that the story of the painted cow is irrelevant either way.)

Why would anyone think this story would be a convincing proof of anything? Clearly, miracle stories are about something other than proving the truth of one specific religion or religious claim among others. It only cheapens both the philosophy and the story to try to use miracle stories to prove a philosophical or religious position. It makes much more sense to let miracle stories function in their own frame of reference as stories in which certain meanings are encoded. Then, our assignment is to contemplate what these stories could mean, to “decode” them sympathetically, rather than to use them as proofs for a philosophical position or to cling to them as descriptions of empirically occurring former events.

Many of my dharma friends are troubled by this position. Their counter to me is often to claim that many of the things we take for granted now—such as wireless transmission of speech and documents across great distance or air travel—are “magical” and would surely have been seen as miraculous by those who lived in earlier times because they seem so impossible. So why not the standard Buddhist miracles, such as flying through space on one’s own power, walking through walls, milking painted cows or one of the most famous Tibetan miracle stories—the story of how Milarepa was able to take shelter in a yak’s horn during a storm without himself becoming smaller or the yak’s horn becoming bigger, while his disciple Rechungpa, who had not yet developed such *siddhi* or supernatural power, got drenched in the rain?

I would reply to their question in several ways. First of all, the technological marvels dependent on the paradigm shift that occurred during the European Enlightenment work, not by contravening physics and natural law but by working carefully within their parameters. At present, actions like walking through walls or milking a painted cow could only be a contradiction of what we understand of natural law to date. Therefore, I neither affirm nor deny such stories but retain a flexible, curious mind about them. Maybe? Show me? Perhaps someday? What would it take to convince me that such events occur? Repeated, public demonstrations of such events, such as happens whenever I use email or board an airplane.

My friends sometimes reply that it takes “advanced spiritual development” to be able to perform the supernatural *siddhi*, to have “magical” powers. That some people can do extraordinary, unbelievable things is a claim made by many religious traditions, and I think it is wiser to maintain an open mind regarding such claims than to adamantly deny that they could happen. However, I teach my students to be equally open-minded to the possibility that such stories could be pious fabrications. I try to teach my students that a curious, questioning mind is more in accord with basic Buddhist values than

either uncritically believing in such miracles in the absence of any evidence, or adamantly denying their possibility on the basis of present knowledge. Given how many seemingly “magical” feats have become common within our lifetimes, who knows in what other ways we will learn to use physics and natural law to perform “miracles” in the future?

But I also claim that it is foolhardy to adamantly affirm the veracity of such claims on the basis of hearsay reports of their occurrence, no matter how prestigious the source of the hearsay: until such feats are publically verifiable, they remain “hearsay,” a product of rumors. That they are hearsay makes them supremely inadequate for demonstrating the truth claims of Buddhism. I would never attempt to convince others to become Buddhists because I have seen it rain out of clear blue sky at the most auspicious moment of a major Buddhist ceremony. Instead, I would rely on the Four Truths and teachings on emptiness for that task!

So what of miracle stories? There are times and places in which stories of miracles and magic made sense to people and have great appeal. But we do not live in such a time and place, so trying to force us to take these stories as factual accounts simply makes it harder for us to take the profound teachings of Buddhism or any other religious tradition seriously. The texts that report on them are not documents that function well in our contemporary cultural context, the post-European Enlightenment. In this, I am not claiming that the paradigm of the European Enlightenment is an ultimate truth that will stand for all time; it probably will not. Nevertheless, we cannot help standing in that paradigm, which means that our great need is to make peace between the prevailing worldview of our culture and the deep and profound teachings of Buddhism, not to try to hold onto and remain attached to every single tale of magic and miracles. My view is that the profoundly enlightened masters who wrote texts that include such stories would not have written them as they did if they had lived in our cultural situation. That is also to say that whoever is writing the equivalent texts today is not going to use miracle stories to prove his or her point.

Actually, I regard tales of magic and miracles as delightful as anyone else, under certain circumstances. Only when they are put to certain uses do I find them misleading and even dangerous. Only when story and history are conflated and confused do they become misleading. Only when miracle stories are used to attempt to prove what can only be proven rationally or empirically do they become dangerous. Otherwise, they are delightfully innocent entertainment and filled with profound lessons . . . if we are willing to read them symbolically, not as science or history.



Decoding Two Stories

Adherents are probably so resistant to giving up their allegiance to literal interpretations of their most valued stories because they think that there are only two alternatives: either accept them literally or reject them altogether, as was the case with the student who left Lotus Garden when the literal accuracy of the *Heart Sūtra* narrative was disproved. But this dualistic assumption is the most dangerous conclusion people could draw regarding story and history. Therefore, when dealing with a seeming conflict between claims stemming from a post-Enlightenment (European) worldview and the supernaturalism of the traditional worldview of the story, I always seek to find deeper consonance between the two claims, rather than rejecting one in favor of the other. Rather than confronting people with the untenability of traditional claims, I try to demonstrate that it is possible to find deep meaning in the traditional narratives even though they are not an accurate physical or historical account. This practice usually involves interpreting the traditional claim symbolically while simultaneously holding a modern account of that same phenomenon.

When Western Buddhist students simply refused to hear that the historical Buddha had not taught the *Heart Sūtra* during his lifetime on earth, I had to come up with everyday examples of how people routinely continue to use traditional language and symbols long after they are regarded as accurate physical descriptions of how things work. I wanted to convince them they could do the same thing regarding the traditional narrative surrounding the *Heart Sūtra*. I began to detect a glimmer of understanding, some developing flexibility, and a less stubborn, fixed mindset when I pointed out that we are very comfortable saying “the sun rose” even though we do not believe a word of that statement. The sun does not rise; the earth turns. We all know that, and know what we mean when we say, “the sun rose.” Why is so hard to do the same with traditional narratives and claims?

Where is Mt. Meru? One of the easiest ways to demonstrate the incompatibility between traditional Buddhist views and modern knowledge involves the traditional, inherited Buddhist map of the earth. In this picture, the earth is flat, with Mount Meru at the center. Mt. Meru is surrounded by the four continents, each of which is flanked by two islands. These lands are surrounded by the great oceans and the whole thing is encircled by a ring of iron mountains. Clearly, the map of the world we use today does not look anything like this and the fact that modern geographical explorations of the physical world did not reveal such a map did cause consternation to Buddhists. But if we understand the traditional map of the world to have much more to do with psychology than with geography, the conflict can be resolved.

Until it was proved empirically that one did not fall over the edge of the world if one continued traveling the same direction, but eventually came back to one's starting point, most people simply assumed that the earth was flat. After all, it looks flat, just as it looks from our vantage point as if the sun rises above the earth's horizon. Given that high mountains are found to India's north, it is also easy to see why India was imagined to be the southern continent among the four, with a giant mountain to its north. All were sensible conclusions until proven false empirically. After they have been proven false empirically, it is senseless and useless to try to hold onto such assumptions because of tradition and authority.

Nevertheless, the traditional world picture continues to be taken seriously. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Christian missionaries to Asian Buddhist countries routinely peppered their anti-Buddhist polemics with references to the fact that no explorer had ever found Mt. Meru anywhere on the globe, that traditional Buddhist geographies simply were inadequate as accurate maps of the earth. On this basis, Buddhists were encouraged to exchange their Buddhism for Christianity. Christian missionaries reasoned with Buddhists that if they were wrong about the physical description of the earth, how could they have any insight about spiritual well-being (Lopez 2008: 41–57)? One can only wonder how many Buddhists were taken in by such arguments. I use this information to impress upon my students how dangerous it can be to cling to traditional accounts as empirically accurate long after they have been disproved by scientific studies.

Until well into the twentieth century, Tibetan Buddhists continued to accept as fact the traditional flat-earth geography. In a story that is both amusing and highly instructive, Ken McLeod, one of Kalu Rinpoche's translators, narrates accompanying a traditionally trained Tibetan teacher to northern Canada during the summer. They arrived in the afternoon and settled in for the night, as usual. The next morning the lama was very troubled by the fact that it had not become dark during the previous night. McLeod used apples and oranges to show him how the sun does not set in the summer in northern regions because of the earth's roundness, the way it tilts on its axis, and the way it rotates around the sun. The lama replied that he had heard the claim that the earth is round when he came out of Tibet, but had dismissed it as another crazy Western idea that was contrary to both everyday sense perceptions and his traditional training. McLeod recounts that the lama was dispirited for some days, but then accepted this new information and returned to his usual cheerful demeanor. His experience of nights without darkness was more powerful than inherited beliefs about the flatness of the earth, even though changing his worldview caused the lama some initial disorientation

(McLeod 2002: 353–354). A short period of dissonance and depression is a small price to pay for more accurate knowledge.

Contrast this with the Dalai Lama's excitement and joy at first seeing a photograph of the earth taken from space. Writing about ethics and science, the Dalai Lama has made the point that earth may be the only planet that can support life, so we need to take care of it.

One of the most powerful visions I have experienced was the first photograph of the earth from outer space. The image of a blue planet floating in deep space, glowing like the full moon on a clear night, brought home powerfully to me the recognition that we are indeed all members of a single family sharing one little house. (His Holiness, the Dalai Lama 2005: 261)

Here there are no worries about the fact that a traditional Buddhist claim has been disproved, that the earth is not flat, or that Mt. Meru is nowhere to be found in the photograph. Instead, easily adjusting to a more complete, and in this case, more empirical geography, the Dalai Lama is free to draw relevant ethical conclusions from this newly found knowledge.

But others seem to have more difficulty coping with the information conveyed in photographs of the earth taken from space. At the end of his chapter on traditional Buddhist geography in his book *Buddhism and Science*, Donald Lopez narrates that in 1977, he was discussing traditional geography with a prominent lama. He asked the lama why Mt. Meru had never been discovered. Lopez noted that they were speaking in Tibetan and the answer could have been translated in two ways: "The first would be, 'If you have pure karma, you can see it.' The second would be, 'if you had pure karma, you could see it'" (Lopez 2008: 72). I was astonished recently to encounter a Jain layman with a superior modern education who was highly troubled by the conflict between the inherited flat-earth world picture and modern knowledge. His longing was to have Jain religious authorities follow the Dalai Lama in simply saying that on this point the traditional scriptures were wrong; instead, he said that Jain religious authorities insisted that someday science would catch up with the traditional scriptures and their world picture of a flat earth!

Flat-earth cosmology continues to figure into Vajrayāna Buddhist ritual to the present day. The "maṇḍala offering" ritual, done daily, utilizes the traditional map of the cosmos. The short form of the liturgy reads:

*The earth is anointed with perfumed water and strewn with flowers.
It is adorned with Mount Meru, the four continents, the sun and the moon.*

*By offering this visualized as a Buddhafield,
May all beings enjoy that pure realm.*

Earlier generations of Vajrayāna Buddhists would have assumed that this liturgy involves a physically accurate picture of the world, as illustrated by the lama's first arctic visit during the summer. Nevertheless, Western Buddhists who do not believe a word of the liturgy literally continue to recite it without difficulty. In this case, it is easy for them to divorce the literal from the symbolic. Clearly, this ritual has little to do with geography. The point of the liturgy is appreciation of the earth, then visualizing it as a singular Buddha field, and finally offering everything, both the earth and the visualized Buddha field, to bring benefit to all beings, enabling them to experience the same felicity that one enjoys oneself. Rather than trying to function as an atlas, this liturgy emphasizes primary Buddhist virtues such as generosity and the wish that all beings can prosper and be happy. That is why it is so easy to continue to do this liturgy daily even while we no longer believe in the literal description of the earth contained in it. Why is it so difficult to transfer this kind of flexibility to painted cows or to the claim that the historical Buddha himself taught Mahāyāna teachings, including the *Heart Sūtra*? Indeed, the example of the ease with which my students continue to perform the *maṇḍala* offering liturgy despite their disbelief in its literal accuracy was one of the wedges with which I finally convinced them to reconsider their dogmatic belief that the Mahāyāna teachings had to have been taught by the historical Buddha.

The Story of the *Heart Sūtra*. What is at stake for Mahāyāna Buddhists that makes them so fearful of letting go of literal interpretations of this *sūtra*? Why is it so difficult for them to relax their adamant claims that this story has to be more than a story—that it has to be history as well? Clearly, these fears and anxieties stem from the fact that Mahāyānists want to believe that the historical Buddha secretly taught Mahāyāna teachings to selected students and that those students did not include the foremost historical students of the historical Buddha. The fear seems to be that Mahāyāna Buddhism would be inauthentic if they were not the direct teachings of the historical Buddha himself.

Against these fears, the scholar-practitioner can marshal many arguments. Mahāyāna Buddhism displays so many features of a new religious movement that any scholar of religious history would immediately identify it as such. The first is that older Buddhist schools have scant references to Mahāyāna Buddhism in their texts and rarely bother to refute their teachings, indicating that the older schools of Buddhism did not perceive them as a threat. By

contrast, Mahāyāna texts constantly justify themselves by contrasting themselves very positively with the older, more established schools, whom they label as “Hīnayāna”—the inferior, cast-off *yāna*. Both tendencies are very common when a new religious movement is emerging. For example, Jews do not spend a lot of time or energy denouncing Christians, but the Christian New Testament is full of claims about the inadequacy of Judaism. The story is much the same with Mahāyāna Buddhism and the older Buddhist schools.

Even the Mahāyāna account of its own origins betrays that it is a new religious movement. When it is claimed that the historical Buddha taught Mahāyāna teachings, it is also taught that the Buddha’s older students were very shocked at what the *Heart Sūtra* has to say, whereupon the Buddha realized that his students needed to mature for hundreds of years before they would be ready to understand these teachings. Thereupon, the Buddha hid the teachings among the *nāgas*, from where they were retrieved some four hundred years later by Nāgārjuna. Ironically, Buddhist legendary history corresponds exactly with empirical studies of Buddhist history on this point: both agree that Mahāyāna teachings appeared on the human plane about four hundred years after the life of Shākyamuni Buddha, which indicates to me that early Mahāyānists were fully cognizant that they were teaching something previously unheard. In fact, all their *sūtras* say precisely that: they all claim that the Buddha is now teaching something he had not revealed previously.

That they felt a need to somehow attribute these teachings to the Buddha is not surprising. When people innovate within an established tradition, they always claim direct inspiration from the example and teachings of the founder. What is untenable from the point of view of empirical history is that in later centuries, people took these stories as actual conversations between the historical Buddha and his historical disciples, rather than as deeply contemplative, imagined conversations between a prototypical Buddha and his prototypical disciples on topics of interest to later contemporary practitioners.

What is even more surprising is that contemporary Western students of Buddhism take the *Heart Sūtra* as a historical narrative despite the mix of historical and nonhistorical characters in its plot. As already mentioned, it is basically a conversation between Shāriputra, a representative of the older Buddhist schools, and Avalokitesvara, a nonhistorical bodhisattva important in Mahāyāna Buddhisms, who did not even emerge as an important figure in Buddhist traditions until centuries after the death of Shāriputra. As is usual in Mahāyāna *sūtras*, Shāriputra does not know what is going on and has to be instructed by the Mahāyāna bodhisattva. This cast of characters alone

should disabuse anyone of the notion that the *Heart Sūtra* could be historical. Shāriputra is a historical character, whereas Avalokiteshvara is not, so the narrative could not be history, even though it is an incredibly important story for Mahāyāna Buddhists. But even the Dalai Lama concedes that the *Heart Sūtra* and other Mahāyāna narratives could not be history. He writes:

When we examine the Mahāyāna scriptures themselves, we find statements that seem problematic in various ways. For example, the Perfection of Wisdom *sūtras* state that they were taught by the Buddha at Vulture Peak in Rājagriha to a vast congregation of disciples. However, if you have visited the site in present day Rājgir, it is obvious that it is impossible for more than a few people to fit onto the summit. So we have to understand the truth of these accounts at a different level, a level beyond the ordinary one confined by conventional notions of space and time. (Gyatso 2005: 46–47)

That is precisely what I advocated to my students, with the help of Black Elk's succinct and profound statement—give up on even trying to read the *Heart Sūtra* as empirical history. Then, as separate but intertwined projects, take up, first, ascertaining an empirical account of the emergence of Mahāyāna Buddhism and, second, interpret the symbolism and meaning of the *Heart Sūtra* on a level beyond literal space and time. But do not confuse and conflate the two.



Conclusion

How successful have I been with dislodging dharma students from their literalism? For years, my own spiritual teacher would have to deal with numerous complaints from students who did not like what they were being taught in my Dharma center history course. She would respond from the teacher's throne, not exactly to agree with what I was teaching, but to instruct students to take seriously what was being taught, reminding them that this course on Buddhist history was being taught with her support and approval. From time to time, she would joke about the fact that it was becoming more difficult to "hold onto Rājagriha," by which she meant to continue to assume that the *Heart Sūtra* was a historical document. In private, she told me that what I was teaching only made her think more deeply about the meaning of Rājagriha, which, of course, is what I was hoping for with all the students. I think by now they have heard the arguments so many times that they have basically

conceded that probably Mahāyāna teachings were not taught by the historical Buddha. I think they also have begun to realize that the cogency of Mahāyāna teachings is not dependent on their historical origins.

Teaching people the difference between history and story, which means demonstrating that some beloved stories simply are not history, is not an easy task. That such stories are not history, however, does nothing to rob them of their meaning and value, but it is very hard to get empirically oriented, post-Enlightenment (European) Western Buddhists to get that point. I regret this because no one loves a good story more than me and I love to tell sacred stories from the great religious traditions. But if I have to watch people to see if they are taking the story literally, that spoils some of the fun. If one takes stories literally, confusing them with historical, empirical events, all the whimsy, humor, and playfulness of the story is lost and they become completely wooden—spoiled in every way because it is not good history and it is no longer a good story either. So please, let us not confuse and conflate story and history!

Notes

1. The *Heart Sūtra* is almost the charter document of Mahāyāna Buddhism. It is represented as a dialogue between Shāriputra, a historical character and major disciple of the Buddha, and Avalokiteshvara, a nonhistorical bodhisattva, that takes place while the Buddha watches and approves of Avalokiteshvara's teachings. Its most famous statement is "form is emptiness and emptiness is form."
2. Many Tibetans explain the long gap between the lifetime of Shākyamuni Buddha and the emergence of Mahāyāna teachings by claiming that after the Buddha taught these teachings, he realized that his disciples were not yet ready to hear them, so he hid them in the realm of the *nāgas* (half-human, half-serpent creatures who dwell in watery places) from where they would be retrieved at a later date when ordinary humans were more prepared to understand Mahāyāna teachings.

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*Deconstructing Fixed Identity
Categories and Cultivating
Appreciation for Diversity*

TEACHING BUDDHISM AND FEMINISM

Hsiao-Lan Hu

Introduction

In recent decades, as universities and colleges are increasingly implementing cultural diversity requirements to their General Education or Core Curriculum, courses on Buddhism and other Asian religious-philosophical-cultural traditions typically fulfill them. At the same time, feminist discourses have gradually shifted focus from women's equality to considering diversity among and within human groups. Given the shared focus on human diversity nowadays, Buddhism and Feminism are not two distinct subjects and can now be brought together. In my experience, Buddhism and feminism can flow together rather easily in the college classrooms. Buddhist deconstruction of the self is quite consonant with the diversity-oriented feminist¹ analyses on social construction, and teaching diversity-oriented feminist critiques feels more and more like attempting to carry out the Buddhist ideal of wishing and working for the welfare and happiness of "all sentient beings."

In the summer of 2004, I taught my own course at Temple University for the first time. It was an upper-level elective course entitled "Women in Religion and Society." I taught that course six times as a gradjunct,² more than the times I taught "Introduction to World Religions" and "Introduction to Asian Religions" combined. After I got a full-time job at the University of

Detroit Mercy (UDM), I taught “Women and Religion” as a lower-level elective and “Gender and Religion” as an upper-level elective that students in the master’s programs can also take. Now that I can create my own courses, I decided that women’s and gender issues in world religions are too many and too complicated to be covered in one course, and so I created a new course entitled “Gender in Asian Traditions” and was awarded the “Grant for the Advancement of Feminist Studies”³ by the Women’s and Gender Studies Program at UDM for developing it. Given the feminist critique that women’s and gender issues should not be taught in an “add women and stir” fashion, as an afterthought to the study of the generic masculine, I also employ feminist critiques in other courses not specifically marked as feminism or gender courses, including the graduate seminars “Buddhism” and “Religions and Global Well-being,” an upper-level undergraduate elective “Buddhism in America,” and the lower-level course “Asian Religions,” as well as in the introductory course in my department, “The Study of Religions.” In such not-specifically-feminist courses I present gender issues as soon as I introduce a tradition or sub-tradition new to students.

Teaching Buddhism and feminism in a gender course is obviously a very different experience from teaching Buddhism and feminism in a course surveying Asian religions or world religions. Students who enroll in “Women in Religion and Society” or “Gender in Asian Traditions” usually take the course for the Women’s and Gender Studies minor, or to fulfill their Core Curriculum requirement of one to two courses in Religious Studies.⁴ Students in the Women’s and Gender Studies Program obviously already have learned something about how religious texts and authorities often are not fair to women or people not conforming to gender roles. Teaching such students is a delight and we invariably have very engaged and enjoyable classes, for they are enthusiastic to learn what has been said about and to women by religious traditions, as well as how women have creatively resisted or reappropriated what they have been taught. It can at times feel like “preaching to the choir,” though most—and sometimes all—the students are females who know that there are problems and are eager to learn about feminist analyses and critiques of them. They do not need to be convinced that religious texts being mostly written and interpreted by and for heteronormative patriarchal men or that this has resulted in tremendous oppression for women and for gender minorities; most do not need to be convinced that religious practices and institutions based on such texts need to be critically examined and can be reformed, sometimes by employing the very texts that seem to condone patriarchal domination. Those who need convincing typically shun courses with “women” or “gender” in the titles, thinking that these issues do not concern

them; on occasion there have been a few male students who started in the course to be argumentative about their androcentric perspectives but most have dropped out after a few weeks, upon finding that none of the female students seemed to be impressed with, much less swayed by, their views.

With regard to the “preaching to the choir” problem, which is very common in the field of women’s and gender studies, the fact that “Women in Religion and Society” and “Gender in Asian Traditions” also count as Religious Studies credits proves to be beneficial—it gets some students into the classroom who are uninterested in the feminist study of religion but need a Religious Studies course to fulfill their Core Curriculum requirements. The increasing attention being paid to diversity—whether religious and cultural diversity or gender diversity—is also beneficial: dealing with women’s and gender issues in multiple religious traditions brings to the forefront the understanding shared by both diversity-oriented feminism and classical Buddhism: (1) identities are socially and mentally constructed, without any intrinsic, unchanging nature; and that (2) mainstream (or men-stream) constructions and prescription of identities have proven to result in much suffering and so are in need of critique and change. Moreover, in this age that some are already calling “the post-feminist era,” many of young people take for granted the benefits hard won by previous feminists and think feminism is over. In a recent poll in the United States published by the *Economist*, only 15% of men and 35% of women identify themselves as “feminists,” without being provided with a clear definition of the term; even after being given the definition of a feminist as “someone who believes in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes,” 49% of men and 31% of women still do not think of themselves as feminists. Fourteen percent of the people polled consider the label “feminist” an insult (Frankovic 2014). (Forty percent of Republican men reported this opinion.) Recently in 2014 there was even a “Women against Feminism” campaign on Twitter, in which women hold photos of themselves with texts explaining the reasons for which they do not need feminism. The anti-feminist campaign on Twitter and those people who take “feminist” to be an insult, of course, do not tell the whole story. In the same *Economist* poll mentioned above, 51% of women under the age of 30 call themselves feminists even without definition. Still, younger women typically take feminism to be a theory or an ideology, rather than a much needed form of ongoing activism—60% of all people and 52% of self-identified feminist women in the aforementioned poll consider “feminist” to be a neutral term. Even students who enroll in women’s and gender studies programs nowadays are typically more interested in human diversity (such as various expressions of gender and sexuality) than in women’s equality (which is a done deal in the eyes of many younger women). This

shift to diversity issues, once again, makes it easier to teach Buddhism and feminism together, even though I usually need to cover women's and gender issues in multiple religious traditions rather than just in Buddhism.

Teaching feminist critiques in and about Buddhism alongside other Asian religions is particularly useful in introducing the concept of multiple and nomadic identities because diverse Asian traditions are often intertwined and do not demand exclusive membership or claim exclusive authority. Many Asians easily shift between multiple religious identities depending on the group of people or life situation in which they find themselves. Teaching feminist critiques in and about Buddhism alongside other world religions in general also has its benefits. Usually by the time we cover women's and gender issues in Buddhism, we have already discussed the pervasive androcentrism in other world religions, as well as in academia and society at large. We would have looked at the ways in which both religious authorities and academic disciplines treat women and women's issues, how they typically consider them negligible or, at best, of secondary importance. We would have looked at the ways in which patriarchy excludes, or sometimes "exempts," women from gatherings and the pivotal rituals that are considered crucial in building one's membership status in the community, thereby silencing or even erasing accomplished women from their history. *Religious Feminism and the Future of the Planet: A Buddhist-Christian Conversation* (2001), co-authored by Rita Gross and Rosemary Ruether, contains many chapters that explore these issues.⁵

We would have looked at some forms of violence against women and gender minorities condoned by, and sometimes resulting from, the attitudes conveyed by religious texts. (*Women's Studies in Religion: A Multicultural Reader* (2006), edited by Kate Bagley and Kathleen McIntosh, is very useful for a survey on women's and gender issues in world religions.) We would also have considered instances in which patriarchal authorities resort to controlling women's sexuality in order to distinguish themselves from other groups, whether the other groups are considered "dominant" or "barbaric."

Finally, we often examine the ways in which "mother goddess(es)" may both empower women in some regards and yet confine them to their role of mother. The discussion about goddesses in particular would have already broken open the topic that it is human beings who construct and reconstruct the imageries of divinity. For students who were mostly raised in an environment where divinity is presumed to be singular, self-existing, and male, this is a groundbreaking perspective. *Seeking Mahādevī: Constructing the Identities of the Hindu Great Goddess* (2001), edited by Tracy Pintchman, is an excellent text that guides students to examine the role of goddesses and the role of mothers.

With the presumed self-existing identity of the divinity being questioned, challenged, and perhaps to some extent deconstructed, it is easier to prompt students to reflect the constructiveness of human identity categories along the lines of Buddhism and diversity-oriented feminism. In a setting where feminist and gender critiques are applied to Buddhism alongside a few other religions, we do not just question what it means to be a man or a woman, we also call into question what it means to be of a religious group or an ethnic group, and what it means to be a member of a dominant group or a minority group. If one is not born a woman but rather “becomes” a woman following social expectations and cultural conditionings, can’t the same be said about “becoming” a Christian, a Muslim, a Buddhist, a white American, a black American, an Asian, or an Asian American? If the binary stereotypes and gender roles of men and women are inaccurate and restrictive, can’t the same be said about other identity categories? Ultimately, what exactly is the self, and isn’t Buddhism right on the target by pointing out that there is not any abiding, unchanging, eternal self? At the same time, if it is our mental and social processes that have made us and shaped us, aren’t we all unique in that no two of us have the exact same experiences, struggles, or sufferings? If each of us defies the description and prescription of any presumed identity category in our unique way, wouldn’t it be fairer and wiser to seek to relate to, and empathize with, one another as individuals who can and will change with every new experience, rather than a part of an identity group that is presumed to be homogeneous and unchanging?

With the coverage of feminist and gender issues in multiple religious traditions, students develop the sensibility to take the experience and suffering of an individual “other” more seriously, be it a gender “other,” a cultural “other,” or an ethnic “other.” Students all know that men in androcentric societies dismiss women’s experiences and concerns, but they do not necessarily notice that they themselves might have dismissed the concerns of gender, cultural, or an ethnic “others.” Learning feminist and gender issues in multiple religious traditions exposes the intersection of biases and oppressions; this helps them to see that they might have been doing the same thing that androcentric societies have done to women. Furthermore, by employing the critical-analytical lens of diversity-oriented feminism empowers students to apply the feminist critique of power and dominance even to those feminist scholars who criticized the dominant groups and structures in their experience, but then were blind to their own privileges and themselves became another dominant, self-centered group to others. For example, some middle-class white feminists criticized traditional androcentrism for subsuming all of humanity under the generic masculine; but then those feminists themselves subsumed all women

under the generic “women” based on the middle-class white women’s experience. Some Christian feminists assumed gender issues in other religions to be the same as the issues they face in Christianity. And some Western feminist scholars who are sympathetic, and even converted, to Buddhism have at times failed to appreciate the different cultural and racial dynamics experienced by Asian Buddhists in their homelands and in diaspora.

Diversity-oriented feminist critique acknowledges that each different experience and situation may call for different strategies and even different goals. Similar precise situational acknowledgment can be found particularly in Chan or Zen Buddhist training. In the practice of confronting Zen *kōans* (Chin. *gong’an*), a disciple who simply copied the answer of the master, or mimicked a response by an enlightened disciple, would be shouted at or even beaten by the master. The understanding is that each person is a unique constellation of ongoing processes and so each needs to find his or her own authentic “lotus seat” by working through his or her own mind’s unique outlook to be liberated. (This is true even though everyone’s issues may overlap and in the Buddhist analysis, all people are “poisoned” by the *kleshas* of attachment, aggression, and egocentrism.) This is a radical recognition of diversity that is both sensitive to the individual experience and committed to universal liberation, not that different from diversity-oriented feminism that both deconstructs identity categories and advocates for peoples of diverse identities. For this segment of my course, I like to use some chapters from *Buddhism, Gender, and Sexuality* (1991), edited by José Ignacio Cabezón; *Buddhist Women in a Global Multicultural Society* (2008), edited by Karma Lekshe Tsomo; *Buddhist Women across Cultures* (1999), also edited by Karma Lekshe Tsomo; and *Dharma, Color, and Culture: New Voices in Western Buddhism* (2004), edited by Hilda Gutiérrez Baldoquín. (My book *This-Worldly Nibbāna: A Buddhist-Feminist Social Ethic for Peacemaking in the Global Community* [2011] is now being used in courses by professors teaching courses such as “Buddhism and Feminism” and “Religious Feminist Activism.”)



BEFORE TEACHING RELIGIOUS studies courses, I had abundant experience teaching languages, both English and Chinese. In my view, the capacity for appreciating diversity and accepting unfamiliar others is crucial in the successful learning of both languages and religions, and these qualities are important outcomes of college education in general. The long-term goal of courses in languages and religious studies, I believe, is to enable students to function in the diverse and increasingly interconnected contemporary society, and to continue working with, and learning from, different “others.” Toward that end,

both skills (such as oral and written presentations, reflective thinking, and seeking out various human and nonhuman resources for mutual benefit) and empathy (including the awareness of existing differences, the ability to consider from others' perspective, and the capacity of being more respectful and less judgmental) are as important as factual knowledge and critical thinking. In addition to helping students order the factual topics in courses and develop the use of critical thinking in applying them to contemporary life, the activities and assignments in my gender and religious studies courses are designed to enable students to foster awareness of, and empathy for, different views and practices, including those of their classmates and those of gender, cultural, and ethnic "others."

With such understanding and pedagogic goals, I have been utilizing tools developed by previous generations of feminists, such as building a sense of non-hierarchical community by having students face each other in class, empowering students to be leaders, assigning collaborative projects, valuing student peer evaluation, as well as encouraging experiential understanding and reflection by assigning fieldwork explorations. For example, common to all of my gender and religious studies courses is the requirement of team research and team presentation, in which students need to work with and around each other's differences in the process of deciding on a topic, distributing responsibilities, coordinating findings, presenting the results in a coherent way as the leaders of the class, and then evaluating the performance of their team members so that they keep in mind that they are responsible for each other.

These feminist pedagogical tools are not that different from the pedagogical inspirations I gleaned from Buddhist teachings, particularly Mahāyāna Buddhism. Indeed, for me, the most exciting convergence of feminism and Buddhism lies in pedagogy. As feminist and queer theorist Eve Sedgwick has pointed out, "The whole of Mahāyāna Buddhism . . . is radically self-defined in pedagogical terms. . . . the vastly more voluminous Buddhist sutras in fact comprise nothing but a series of dramatized scenes of instruction. In Mahāyāna scriptures, scenes of teaching and learning are universally desired ends as much as they are instrumental means" (2003: 160–161). In the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sūtra*, for example, the Buddha's skillful means, "which always refers to pedagogical means," is said to be so great that "The Buddha speaks with but one voice, and each sentient being understands in accordance with his/her type" (174). In the *Lotus Sūtra*, it is said that, in order to teach the *Buddhadharma* to different beings in forms that they can accept, Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, would even appear to them in different forms. Both feats seem rather impossible for us pre-enlightened human instructors to achieve. However, it is possible to approximate those feats by breaking them down into several components:

(1) Being fully cognizant of the fact that students differ from one another in terms of interests, levels of academic preparedness, individual abilities and strengths, learning styles, speed of grasping new materials, and levels of understanding. “Each understands in accordance with his/her capacity” is a fact, no matter what the instructor does or does not do. (In Buddhist terms, each has a different karmic past and so a unique learning capacity.) The instructor can strive to prevent misunderstanding and try to keep everyone on the same page, but since students will understand differently nevertheless, she has to accept the fact and be prepared to deal with it. Surely the instructor can physically speak “with but one voice,” but the one voice can present the material at several levels of difficulty so that no student will be left out and no student will be completely bored.

It is also important to remember that students with different abilities and learning strategies flourish in different kinds of course requirements, and therefore a teacher needs to devise various ways to evaluate student performance. Some can very easily empathize with others and enjoy field trips very much, but falter at public speaking; some are excellent public speakers but do not yet write very well; some write elegantly but find group work challenging; some are at ease when interacting with classmates, but have difficulty with tests; and some are good at taking tests but have not yet cultivated empathy. In order to accommodate and maintain fairness for students of all types, I use different kinds of evaluation and keep them in proportion with one another so that students with different strengths all have a chance to shine. Buddhism and diversity-oriented feminism share such recognition of human differences.

(2) Emptying the “self” and “taking refuge” in the co-learning community in the classroom. In the perspective of interdependent co-arising, nothing happens unidirectionally and “everything arises through mutual conditioning in reciprocal interaction” (Macy 1991: xi), including teaching and learning. Sedgwick has noted that in Buddhist understanding it is hard “to assign the labels of pupil, teacher, and teaching on any stable basis” (2003: 176). One of the refrains of the *Diamond Sūtra* is that bodhisattvas liberate all beings but do not think any being is liberated by them. Likewise, an instructor teaches but acknowledges that it is the students who learn. Moreover, as the poststructuralist feminist analysis goes, social conditionings such as binary gender hierarchy are inscribed on the body, which is why they appear to be “natural”; to counteract such deeply ingrained ideology that seems embodied, the acceptance and appreciation for diversity has to be embodied, too, to make a difference. What better way to embody the appreciation for diversity than alternating the leadership in the classroom and officially making everyone in

the classroom learn from each other? As feminist scholar and social activist bell hooks said in *Teaching to Transgress*,

The classroom should be an exciting place, never boring. . . . As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence. Since the vast majority of students learn through conservative, traditional educational practices and concern themselves only with the presence of the professor, any radical pedagogy must insist that everyone's presence is acknowledged. That insistence cannot be simply stated. It has to be demonstrated through pedagogical practices. To begin, the professor must genuinely value everyone's presence. There must be an ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes.⁶

Students learn better when they actively engage in the classroom, as literature in education has testified. Each person in the classroom, including the teacher, has much to learn from others and has something to offer in return. In my experience, paradoxically, effective teaching happens when I consciously set myself up to learn from students, recognizing them as constellations of experiences, many of which I do not have. At the same time, students come to understand the material better when they have to "teach" and evaluate each other's work. Besides, as Buddhist-feminist scholar Sid Brown notes in *A Buddhist in the Classroom*, "We are all more likely to remember what we said in a conversation than what our conversational partner said. So there's wisdom in giving students the room they need to surprise themselves with their learning" (2008: 89). When students teach, they learn actively and more in-depth, they retain better what they learn, they do not so easily get tired of the professor's lecturing, and when the teacher does lecture they are more sympathetic and supportive because they have been "on stage" themselves and now understand the challenges and difficulties more empathetically.

The existence of diversity in abilities and learning styles can actually result in a rich and interesting co-learning environment if the instructor lets go of personal preferences, interests, moods, and ego. Regarding this I resonate very much with bell hooks' personal reflection, "I feel I've benefited a lot from not being attached to myself as an academic or professor. It's made me willing to be critical of my own pedagogy and to accept criticism from my students and other people without feeling that to question how I teach is somehow to question my right to exist on the planet" (1994: 134). Moreover, checking the

“self” at the door upon entering the classroom also allows an instructor to notice more and respond to students better. Once students feel they are seen and listened to, they listen to each other more attentively during class discussions, too; notes hooks, “the more students recognize their own uniqueness and particularity, the more they listen” (1994: 151). Once the teacher has successfully nurtured a co-learning community in which everyone participates and listens to each other, students will naturally enrich one another with their different levels of understanding.

The most significant breakthrough that I have had as a teacher happened in the “Women in Religion and Society” course in the fall of 2006 when I was also going through a few personal crises. Life was so painful at the time that the only way for me to teach was to block my “self” completely out when I entered a classroom. Any residue of self-concern significantly impeded my ability to discuss the course material with students. The result in terms of teaching was surprisingly wonderful: students from that class, even the one who only got a C for the semester, told me it was a magical class and afterwards kept in touch with me. When I checked my “self” at the door, I became much more perceptive and intuitive than I had ever been; I was able to notice those slight changes in students’ facial expressions and intonations that indicate confusion or any hidden insight they might have realized, and this allowed me to respond to them in the right away. Students felt they were listened to, and in turn they listened to each other, too. They also came to class better prepared because they wanted to participate in the lively discussion in which every one of them had a voice. As such, for the first time in my life I understood experientially how being detached from self-concerns could really help one respond much better to the here-and-now, as taught in Buddhism. What people in education call “student-centered teaching” is to a large extent predicated on the instructor letting go of the “self” and “taking refuge” in a co-learning classroom community.

(3) Being mindful of one’s own bodily, verbal, and mental actions in front of students. Due to the traditional power dynamic in the classroom, the sense of mutually respecting co-learning community must begin with the instructor. As Brown writes, “Through what teachers choose to include and emphasize and what we choose to exclude and de-emphasize, we display our view of the world and what we value. Further, through how we interact with students and the qualities of our relationships with them, we not only display our view of the world but also create it” (2008: x). Students can sense if the instructor is bored with them, condescending to them, or typecasting them based on one poor performance. Therefore, an instructor can mindfully watch her own gestures,

speech, and attitude in front of students, in the same way that Buddhists are told to watch their bodily, verbal, and mental actions (*karma*). An instructor disciplines herself to see all students as teachable and agents of learning, despite past performances that may or may not be poor, just as Buddhas and Bodhisattvas regard all sentient beings capable of enlightenment. Here the Buddhist teaching of no-self again is useful: a person cannot be defined by one aspect of his or her composite and ever-changing being, much less by one act. Furthermore, having multiple identities myself, I understand deeply that everyone has many dimensions that I do not see. As noted educator Parker Palmer says, “the subjects we teach are as large and complex as life . . . the students we teach are larger than life and even more complex,” and so we need to “see them clearly and see them whole, and respond to them wisely in the moment” (1998: 2). As such, I learn not to typecast students by any performance in any one assignment and strive to look at them with fresh eyes each time. When an instructor disciplines himself to hold such an attitude and looks at students with what Chan/Zen would call “beginner’s mind” each time, students do very often grow in unexpected ways, and so does the instructor (hooks 1994: 21). Furthermore, with the teacher demonstrating a nonjudgmental attitude herself, students also learn not to write off each other based on one mishap in the process of group work, while being appreciative of the patience shown by their teammates and the teacher. When students conduct fieldwork, such as visiting a religious community or interviewing people of different backgrounds, they can carry this attitude with them and more easily understand the viewpoints of the “others” without holding fast to their own preconceived notions.

(4) Being mindful of students’ responses and needs, and being familiar with the material and teaching tools, can allow instructors to be more flexible and willing to make adjustments. Granted, it is impossible for a pre-enlightened human instructor to change physical forms like Avalokiteshvara does after hearing the cries of others; but some semblance of compassionate transformability can be achieved by being mindful and willing to change. Truly, the Buddhist teaching in its Mahāyāna variation has inspired and empowered me the most as a teacher and as a diversity-oriented feminist. The Buddha is portrayed first and foremost as a great teacher who utilized “skillful means” in his teaching and was able to adjust his teaching in response to different needs of very different people in different times and places. To be able to respond to one’s audience this way, one has to concentrate on the audience rather than on one’s self. One has to pay close attention to every present moment, as Chan/Zen practice prescribes, and one has to be willing to change, not unlike the way the Bodhisattva of Compassion changes into different forms in order to

relate to different people. Practicing “classroom mindfulness” enables the instructor to be more perceptive in decoding students’ facial and vocal expressions. Such an ability to perceive subtle changes of and among students does not come naturally to everyone, I was told, but “like a muscle, the quality of attention can be developed through its use” (Brown 2008: 14) and regular mindfulness practices, even if just ten minutes per day, can improve one’s ability to perceive students’ needs. If the majority of the students manifest certain needs that are not met by the current proceedings in the classroom, the instructor needs to try other means to open up students to understanding Buddhism, and do so without being attached to the speed and format of delivery, in-class activities, and/or evaluation methods that are already in place. . . . just like Avalokiteshvara is not attached to any particular identity and freely takes different forms. This practice, in a way, is following the example of the historical Buddha, who actually made many changes in the sangha rules in response to new situations and critical comments from both monastics and householders. “Like all good teachers,” Sid Brown accurately points out, “the Buddha learned all the time and took suggestions from others” (2008: 84).

An instructor who seeks to instill in students the appreciation for human diversity particularly needs to pay attention to students’ needs and be willing to make adjustments. In a big class where it is impossible to see and hear every student, one can solicit midterm feedback from students. (I find the questions used by Sid Brown to elicit midterm evaluations to be very useful [2008: 104–105].) I personally ask for two anonymous midterm feedbacks every semester regardless of the class size, and when there seems to be a majority consensus from students, I make adjustments accordingly. I am willing to change my format and material based on students’ responses because I believe that teaching is an interactive activity and learning is an organic process. “We communicate best by choosing that way of speaking that is informed by the particularity and uniqueness of whom we are speaking to and with,” bell hooks writes, and so we need to “recognize each classroom as different, that strategies must constantly be changed, invented, reconceptualized to address each new teaching experience” (1994: 10–11). As long as the instructor has enough professional knowledge to maintain the quality control, “meeting students where they are” only enhances the classroom experience. “Meeting students where they are” depends on awareness of students’ different backgrounds, abilities, and needs, as well as a massive repertoire of new pedagogical tools and in-class activities that need to be learned and updated.⁷

Having been brought up in Chinese culture where the normative classroom proceedings are noticeably different from what they are in North America, I have had abundant incentives to reflect on the objectives and

methods of teaching. Both Buddhism and diversity-oriented feminism have given me insights into human diversity. They have supplied me with wonderful pedagogical tools that proved to be beneficial in religion courses that deal with women's and gender issues in a university where the student body is diverse, both in terms of ability and cultural heritage. Being taught facts about different others may or may not inspire students to handle human diversity with sensitivity, but being respected and empowered and empathized with, and seeing very different classmates get respected and empowered and empathized with, is an experience that will stay with students. I hope that by taking courses informed by this methodology, students will be oriented to live in a society where diversity can no longer be neglected or subsumed under the generic masculine, the generic woman, the generic race, the generic class, the generic culture, the generic religion, or even the generic Buddhism.

Notes

1. In general, I resist the labels of "second-wave feminism" and "third-wave feminism," and I prefer referring to them as "justice-oriented feminism" and "diversity-oriented feminism." The former set of labels implies a generational divide that does not really exist. A feminist who was active during the so-called "second-wave feminism" may be very concerned about diversity issues, and a feminist who was born after the so-called "third-wave feminism" does not necessarily concern themselves with the experiences of minority "others."
2. At Temple, a "gradjunct" is a graduate student who teaches as adjunct instructor.
3. "Grant for the Advancement of Feminist Studies" is provided by the Women's and Gender Studies Program at UDM to support research in feminist scholarship and the development of courses that will expand the academic offerings of the UDM Women's and Gender Studies Program. This yearly grant is open to all full-time, part-time, or adjunct faculty members at UDM. Later on it was split in two to "Feminist Scholarship Grant" and "Feminist Teaching Grant." The "Criteria for Approval of Women's and Gender Studies Courses" reads:

The Women's and Gender Studies Program is essential to the mission of University of Detroit Mercy, extending the mandate for respect of persons to those traditionally marginalized in society and in the academic pursuit of knowledge. Academic excellence is achieved only when all voices contribute to each discipline.

The Women's and Gender Studies Program critically examines the place of women and gender in culture and society. Feminist theory is applied to traditional disciplines to analyze the origins and effects of power, dominance, and gender. Since women's issues and gender issues encompass and modify all areas of knowledge, and since such issues as race, class, and sexuality are

- crucial aspects of such experiences, the program will be interdisciplinary and multi-cultural.
4. The current core curriculum in my university requires one course in Religious Studies and two courses in Philosophy, or two in Religious Studies and one in Philosophy.
 5. Rita Gross's *Buddhism after Patriarchy* (1993) is a good resource for feminist study of Buddhism, although it is difficult to cover the whole book in a course that has to address multiple religious traditions.
 6. hooks 1994: 7–8. Chapter 3 of hooks (1994), “Embracing Change: Teaching in a Multicultural World,” and chapter 6, “Essentialism and Experience,” explicate the reasons for which it is necessary to build a co-learning community in the classroom where everyone feels responsible to contribute and everyone’s experience is respected.
 7. For this reason, I have been avidly attending teaching seminars and teaching workshops (at the University of Iowa, at Temple University, at the University of Detroit Mercy, and at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meetings) and recommend these to instructors at all stages of their careers.

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*Teaching Buddhism in the World
Religions Course—Challenges
and Promise*

Gary DeAngelis

Introduction

This is a reflective essay on how my approach to teaching the Introduction to World Religions course, and particularly Buddhism in this course, has evolved over the years with the hope that some of my insights and frustrations may be of some value, particularly to younger scholar/teachers wrestling with some of the same issues. While I have studied and taught Buddhism, I would not consider myself a Buddhologist by any means. So, this chapter is primarily intended for those younger scholars, who are also not Buddhologists, teaching the introductory course in either World Religions or Asian Religions. While some scholars may debate whether it is even possible to study something as complex as Buddhism in two or three weeks (four to six class sessions) and come away with anything of value, I remain convinced, after all of these years, that the answer is an unqualified yes. Ultimately, it is a matter of how you approach this inquiry and what your expectations are for both you and your students. In reality, probably 90% (and possibly more) of your students will never take another religious studies course. There may be a few who will be inspired by this rudimentary introduction to take another more in-depth course in one of the religious traditions covered and perhaps some may even become religious studies majors and go on to graduate school. This is how it began for me and I am sure for many others in our field. If we are engaged in contributing to the liberal education of our students and preparing them to

be world citizens, then exposing them to the basic principles of the Buddhist worldview is valuable. But it is also critical for students to be able to make sense of not only the philosophical complexity but also how these relate to Buddhists today, their practices and rituals: What does contemplating the question “who am I” in Zen practice in Kyoto, pouring water over statues of Kobo Daishi at Mt. Koya, offering rice to monks in Sri Lanka, doing *vipassanā* mindfulness practice in California, making donations to monasteries in Ladakh, performing pilgrimage to Mt. Wu Tai in China, or praying to Guan-yin in Taiwan have to do with *saṃsāra*, karma, *satori*, *anātman*, *shunyā*, and *nirvāṇa*? To say that one set of practices and beliefs is “popular Buddhism” and another is “philosophical (or ‘true’) Buddhism” is to present a false dichotomy and a misrepresentation of what Buddhism as the living tradition really is. The challenge in the world religions course is how to provide an accurate picture of Buddhist practice and belief in a very limited time period, and to be consistent in how we present Buddhism among other world religions.



Foundational Standpoints

Many years ago, when I taught my first undergraduate world religions course as an advanced graduate student, my great fear was that I had very little idea of what I was talking about and students would quickly come to the same conclusion. Fortunately, a colleague of mine who was in the same situation, offered me some invaluable Jersey City street advice that had nothing to do with pedagogical theory: “all you need to remember at this point is that you know more than they do and if they ask you something that you don’t know don’t b.s. them. Tell them you don’t know but you’ll find out.” I’ll have to say, that simple advice sustained me through some fairly rough early years of teaching. I pretty much stuck with the basic foundational principles with each religious tradition and somehow got by with surprisingly good teaching evaluations, although, in hindsight, those may have had more to do with our preparation of Chinese and Indian meals than with anything that I was teaching them. I also began to delude myself, contrary to all available evidence, that I was becoming somewhat of an expert in all of these different religious traditions. I was abruptly brought back to earth when I began to travel to India, China, Japan, and Southeast Asia and had a very difficult time recognizing these religious traditions that I had become a self-proclaimed expert on and even the ones that I actually did have some expertise in. Yes, some of the outward manifestations (rituals, forms, etc.) looked somewhat familiar but so many practices seemed quite foreign. To say the least, it was

incredibly unsettling. It left me with a nagging and troubling concern that my scholarly inquiry into the study of religion was not providing me with a true, or at least, accurate picture of what I was trying to comprehend. It wasn't, in the case of Buddhism, that the foundational beliefs seemed irrelevant in real life but that they didn't seem to square with what I was finding among the overwhelming majority of practicing Buddhists, outside of some Buddhist monks and scholars. It also made me think that what I had been teaching students was some idealized, or even romanticized, form of Buddhism that had little to do with the practice and beliefs of Buddhists in the real world. My graduate studies focused on Buddhist theory and textual analysis but very little on popular practice and belief. During my first trip to India (which no one ever forgets) and exposure to Hinduism, I was confronted with this same problem. In the confusion of what I was witnessing I remembered an admonition from one of my graduate school professors, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, in his Introduction to Islam course, that "religion doesn't exist up in the sky somewhere but in the daily lives of people, in the lived experience, in their attitudes, feelings, beliefs, about life and death, hopes and dreams, relationships, disappointments, etc." I also remembered reading in one of the popular books on Native American beliefs that "religion is not what you read in a book but the way that you walk on the earth, the way that you relate to others."¹



Living Realities and History (Re-)Imagined

During a trip to Japan, I participated in the Shikoku pilgrimage of the monk and esoteric Buddhist master Kobo Daishi also known as Kukai (Reader 2005). I knew something about the history of this pilgrimage and the experience of some pilgrims. I guess that I assumed that I would actually be walking, as they say, with Kobo Daishi and engage fellow pilgrims in discussion of *nirvāṇa*, *shūnyatā*, dependent origination, and so on. Instead, what we did talk about were the blessings of the Buddha and Kobo Daishi, some notion of a Buddhist Heaven or paradise, building up merit (good karma), transferring merit to a recently dead relation, health cures, and helping oneself in the next life. Conversations were usually about families, disappointments, food, and sore feet. Again, I was left asking where is the "real Buddhism" here? I began to think that maybe there were two Buddhisms: the Buddhism of the elite and the Buddhism of the masses focusing on worshiping the Buddha, acquiring merit, giving alms to support monks and monasteries, singing hymns, lighting candles, going on pilgrimage, all supporting our psychological and

spiritual needs and, as Freud would claim, driven merely by hopes and fears. At the same time there was the “true” Buddhism of the monks and scholars who spent their days in meditation, the elite who sought the meditative states and insight (*prajñā*) essential to realize *nirvāṇa* and who immersed themselves almost exclusively in contemplating the doctrines of emptiness (*shūnyatā*), impermanence (*anitya*), no-self (*anātman*), and the chain of causation (*pratītyasamutpāda*).

But as I traveled more, I noticed that not all monks—in fact very few in my experience—were doing what the idealized monk was supposed to be doing! Most were at work at rather mundane things: sweeping courtyards, managing the shrine rooms for the public, performing rituals, or just sitting around. Even among the monastic elite—5% of the population in all Buddhist countries (except for Tibet’s 20%)—few seem to be living by the ideal so often imagined in the West. And then with the studies by Greg Schopen (1996, 2004, 2005, 2014a) and others (e.g., Clarke 2014), I was disabused of constructing the Western ideal of the typical Buddhist monk or nun as a spiritual virtuoso. Then, as now, monastics are also concerned with making merit, transferring it to dead relatives, and using the Dharma to heal others through rituals.

Although initially I saw both the monastic and popular/lay Buddhism as a corruption of the “true” Buddhism of the Buddha, I wondered if the historical Buddha were to return to the world today would he recognize the tradition he founded? And can the study of Buddhism lead us and our students to ask the same of Jesus and Christianity, Muhammed and Islam, and so on?

The challenge in any introductory course is, once again, to square these two seemingly disparate views of Buddhism. The complexity and connections between the different practices, forms, and sects of Buddhism can be adequately explored in the one-semester “Introduction to Buddhism” course, but what is possible in the two- to three-week section of the “Introduction to World Religions” course? I think that making it clear to students that the dichotomy of philosophical Buddhism and popular Buddhism is a false dichotomy and that Buddhist belief and practice must be viewed as a continuum, and in line with Buddhist teachings and practice. I am not claiming that all Buddhists are the same, because in its spread and accommodation over the last two thousand plus years it has become increasingly complex and diversified due to its lack of dogma and central authority. It is also no longer a matter of the simple doctrinal split between the Mahāyāna and Theravāda schools. However, as an introduction to Buddhism, I would certainly emphasize the importance of highlighting the continuities and differences between these two schools: the commonality of the monastic center of every Buddhist society, the universal belief in karma linked to the practice of making merit, and the faith in the

power of the Buddha's words to affect the material world. In fact, students need to be sensitized to the fact that without a central authority to determine what was normative or orthodox, this tradition survived and did not compromise itself out of existence. While this incredible diversity is endlessly fascinating, the Buddhist facility for cultural accommodation across its global diaspora is to be noted, even if it cannot possibly be dealt with in detail in five or six class sessions. And again, isn't this a historical reality that can also be asked of Christianity and Islam, the world's other missionary faiths?

To return to our world religions survey course, what can be dealt with in such a limited period are the basic Buddhist teachings and beliefs, which hold all of this diversity together. Once again, I would return to the idea of a continuum to help resolve these enormous disparities. If we focus on the three refuges: the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha and the belief in karma and transmigration, we can perhaps provide a basis for understanding both the uniqueness of Buddhism and the common thread that runs through the diverse forms and expressions that constitute the Buddhist path. It is primarily a question of where you are on the path toward spiritual progress and eventually enlightenment. No real dichotomy exists in practice, only in objective study. An understanding of these basic teachings will not only help students make sense of the apparent split between popular/lay Buddhism and monastic/philosophical Buddhism but will also provide a solid foundation for further in-depth study of the complexity and diversity that is Buddhism today. While one could not possibly cover the incredible diversity that is Buddhism today (some would say *Buddhisms*²), it might prove edifying to students looking for real world manifestations of Buddhist practice and teachings to briefly examine some of the numerous popular forms of Buddhism operating in Japan today. This would move the consideration of Buddhism beyond the abstract level and present students with living and vibrant examples of the diversity of Buddhist practice and belief in the world today. Having students visit a local Buddhist monastery/temple would also serve this purpose.

In teaching the World Religions course it is critical, in your own mind, to be clear about what the goals of this course are, both for you and your students. That will determine not only how you structure and teach the course but how to realize those goals. For me, it goes back to Smith's admonition of understanding, at the existential level, the meaning and experience for the believer and practitioners.

This raises both pedagogical and epistemological issues regarding liberal learning. My emphasis tends to be encouraging students to look at the world through the eyes of believers. Indeed, an understanding of the outward manifestations and beliefs is critical but ultimately this must come down to an

understanding of the lived experience. That understanding cannot only be through the acquisition of information but also through an emphasis on critical analysis, empathetic understanding, and inquiry into how these beliefs and practices relate to how I understand my life and the world. Again, the emphasis should be on what it means to be a Buddhist (i.e., what does the world look like through the eyes and in the mind of a Buddhist). This is no easy task and requires total engagement on their part. This engagement requires working toward overcoming ethnocentrism, which inhibits both religious and cultural understanding, and an expanded epistemological perspective that goes beyond rational and objective reasoning to a consideration of intuition, feelings and emotions, the body, and senses as additional means of acquiring knowledge.



The Course

In light of these goals for the course, we begin by reading Clifford Geertz's (1966) article "Religion as a Cultural System." In this piece, Geertz defines religion as "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (1966: 8). This piece is particularly valuable for Western students who tend to compartmentalize religion and see it as one separate part of life and not as part of a larger cultural matrix or, in some cases, the matrix itself. I have also found it to be extremely valuable in reorienting students to look at religion as a way of being. I am fully aware of the criticism that has been leveled at Geertz's piece, and specifically at his definition of religion, as being much too general. However, if it is used in conjunction with Ninian Smart's book, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (1983), it can encourage students to look at religion in much more all-encompassing terms and understand the profound role and impact of religious symbols and rituals in people's lives. In Smart's book, as well as in his earlier writings, he lays out a model recognizing six dimensions of religious worldviews—the doctrinal, mythic, ethical, ritual, experiential, and social—that together enable us to look at religion in comprehensive, holistic terms. This worldview approach, he claims, is at the heart of the modern study of religion, freeing us from what he perceived to be the "compartmentalization of religious studies" and allowing us to see religions within their much broader cultural contexts.

Using Geertz and Smart, it is possible to establish a set of common themes or topics that not only may be used for understanding a particular religion

but understanding even more about that religion in comparison with other religious traditions. Under Smart's aforementioned dimensions of a religious worldview one could consider such topics as notions of ultimate reality, the nature of self and the phenomenal world, ideas of what constitutes the good life, the afterlife, and so on. It might also be edifying to examine and compare what constitutes religious practice and belief at different levels, from commoner to elite. This is not simply a desire for symmetry but a phenomenological approach to help make sense of the diversity and complexity that students are faced with. To highlight some of the particular differences between Buddhism and other religious worldviews I have found it helpful and intriguing to have students to focus on one of the distinguishing features of Buddhism, the conception of no-self (*anātman*). This examination tends to engage them at both the existential and theoretical levels.

In dealing specifically with Buddhism, we begin by looking at the cultural and historical context of the emergence of Buddhism and what it was in the life of the Buddha that inspired his profound insights about the nature of sentient existence. While a historical approach to the study of Buddhism is virtually impossible in this course, it is important to cover Buddhism's formative period in India and how it moved from a localized sect appealing to the intelligentsia and mendicants, through the universalizing efforts of Ashoka, to become a major world religion, with great appeal to commoners. As we begin to examine the Buddha's teachings, in the Four Noble Truths and the characteristics of sentient existence, most students begin to realize that he has put his finger on some of the major pathologies and harsh realities of human life that affect all people and that the Buddha offers a way to reduce these maladies and eventually find release from mortal existence. At this point the focus is on the basic principles of karma, transmigration, *samsāra*, ignorance that leads to suffering, how to escape this suffering or, at least, how to improve one's lot in this life and the next, and the notion of *nirvāṇa* or the place where there is no suffering.

While understanding these concepts is critical to any understanding of Buddhism, students begin to appreciate that these concepts, for the most part, are probably much too profound for mass consumption and appear to be more of a philosophical system than a religion. As a result, what emerges are beliefs and practices that make Buddhism much more accessible to the masses, for example, the realization that one can improve one's lot in this world and the next by taking refuge in the Three Treasures, the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha (true of all Buddhists); then by performing good deeds and ritual acts, one can be born in a more spiritual existence and even reach a Buddhist heaven. While this may appear to be a "dumbed

down” version of the teachings of the historical Buddha, the reality is that the Buddha laid out a path, the Noble Eightfold Path, to lead all beings toward liberation. Being a Buddhist means moving forward wherever one is on that path. The path, from beginning to end, can be divided into four sections, beginning with right actions, moving toward meditation and its fruits (*prajñā*), and ending with *nirvāṇa* or liberation. The overwhelming majority of Buddhist adherents are householders located along the first part of the Eightfold Path which emphasizes the development of moral character and ritual practice to build up one’s accumulation of good karma. This aspect of Buddhist practice and belief can be observed in all countries with Buddhist communities.

The last two stages of the path are defined by meditative practice, observed in many Zen temples and Buddhist monasteries, which leads to *prajñā* (wisdom) and finally, when this is perfected, *nirvāṇa* attainment. Once again, the householder Buddhism of the masses and the more contemplative Buddhism of the monastics are not two separate paths nor are they two different types of Buddhism. As noted earlier, the key is to examine these seemingly two very different types or forms of Buddhism and establish the connection between the two. My colleague at Holy Cross, Todd Lewis, presents this seeming dichotomy in a particularly helpful form as a bell curve where the overwhelming number of Buddhist adherents, whose main focus is to acquire merit, would fall at the apex of the curve while the very small number of practitioners seeking *nirvāṇa* realization would be found at the nadir or lowest point at the extreme of one curve (Lewis 2010: 10). This bell curve model would also be very helpful in a comparative analysis of belief and practice for all religious traditions. Ultimately, the goal in Buddhism is to overcome the ignorance and desire that leads to suffering, and attain the knowledge that leads to *nirvāṇa*—the state of existence where there is no suffering. This false dichotomy between popular/lay Buddhism and monastic/philosophical Buddhism can only be overcome by focusing on transmigration and karma. They are the critical unitive aspects of the continuum and the continuum is the path that leads to liberation.

While the study of Buddhism is certainly much more complex than what I have presented here, the intent of this chapter, once again, is to square the circle and, in the very limited period of time a World Religions survey course offers, suggest some possibilities for presenting a basic understanding of, what some would refer to as, mainstream Buddhism in a fairly coherent and truthful manner. While it is important to highlight the uniqueness of some of these basic principles, it is also critical to indicate how those could be built upon in different cultural iterations and how it might be possible to resolve, or

at least explain, the seeming inconsistencies and incongruences in Buddhist practice and belief.

Notes

1. Perhaps it is from *Black Elk Speaks*—but I cannot find the exact quote so allow me to paraphrase.
2. Significantly, the title of the 5th edition of *The Buddhist Religions* was changed to include this plural of Buddhism.

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PART IV

*Buddhism and the American
Context*

When the Iron Bird Flies

SEEKING WESTERN BUDDHISM IN THE CLASSROOM

Charles Prebish

Introduction

When I first joined the faculty of the Religious Studies Department of the Pennsylvania State University in September 1971, I was not only delighted to have found a tenure-track position directly after Graduate School, but thrilled to have landed in a department that focused on religious traditions in America, both in its undergraduate program and newly authorized graduate program. Just how a textually trained Buddhist studies scholar who was primarily interested in Buddhist philology would fit into this landscape was not exactly clear, but I didn't have to wait very long to find out.

In the spring of 1972, one of my students asked me what I thought of Philip Kapleau. Prior to that time, I had simply known Kapleau as the author of *The Three Pillars of Zen*, a fine book focusing on the Americanization of Japanese Zen, and which had become as popular in America's counterculture as Jack Kerouac's book *The Dharma Bums*. When I proceeded to begin an exegesis of the book, in my usual fashion, the student quickly interrupted me by saying, "That's not what I meant! I've read the book and can make up my own mind about its merits and shortcomings. I want to know what you think of Kapleau . . . *rōshi*." After recovering from the shock of a rather pretentious intrusion into my scholarly discourse, I realized that prior to that moment, for me there was no Philip Kapleau—only a faceless author of a popular book. In other words, I had no personal appraisal of Kapleau, or of any of the growing number of Buddhist communities that were appearing on the American landscape. When I realized how little I knew about these groups—modern

sanghas unlike the ancient ones I had been studying and writing about—I asked myself what I was going to do about my ignorance. The remedy fueled the creation of my first course on American Buddhism—the first of its kind ever taught in a North American university—and a publication fury that has lasted for four decades and dominated my scholarly career. I soon began to investigate every American Buddhist community I could locate as I scoured newspapers, magazines, journals, and even the “Yellow Pages” for information on American Buddhist groups.



First Efforts: 1975–1993

My first course was offered as a “Special Topics” course, allowing my new department to carefully consider whether my fanciful offering was intellectually valid and pedagogically worthwhile enough to merit permanent status in its list of course offerings. It eventually did indeed become part of the Religious Studies curriculum as “Buddhism in the Western World: A general survey of the development of Buddhism as a religious tradition in the West, focusing especially on America.”

This experimental course preceded my very first book on what I quickly began to call “American Buddhism,” by quite a number of years, but my academic course mirrored the structure of the book. It built its foundation on an old saying attributed to the Tibetan saint Padmasambhava, who was supposed to have said:

*When the iron bird flies, and horses run on wheels,
The Tibetan people will be scattered like ants across the World,
And the Dharma will come to the land of the Red Man.*

In other words, Part One, “The Iron Bird Flies,” dealt with the history of the American Buddhist movement. Part Two, “Horses Run on Wheels,” treated what I called “The Flowering of Buddhism in America,” in which I presented eight case studies of American Buddhist communities. And Part Three, “Dharma Comes to the Land of the Red Man,” considered the future of American Buddhism, perhaps too optimistically dubbed “New Heaven and Earth” in honor of D. H. Lawrence’s not very well-known 1917 poem. At that time, almost nobody was actually willing to claim that Padmasambhava had foreshadowed Buddhism’s appearance in North America, but I sure came close, prompting my critics in the university to snicker behind my back. After all, my academic department head initially rejected my first sabbatical

proposal to study American Buddhism in the San Francisco Bay area by insisting, "There is no such thing as American Buddhism."

Although my first book on this topic, eventually called *American Buddhism*, was not to appear until 1979, the course was exceedingly well received as an undergraduate seminar. Case-specific source material was exceedingly sparse. Emma McLoy Layman's 1976 book, *Buddhism in America*, was not yet published; nor was Rick Fields's classic volume *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* (1981). Nevertheless, what the class members lacked in research materials, they more than made up for with enthusiasm. By the end of the course, seminar papers were submitted on topics ranging from Buddhist influences in Gary Snyder's poetry to case studies of Buddhist communities visited by class members during semester breaks.

Precisely because my first courses on Western forms of Buddhism carried no prerequisites, I recommended that all students find a good introductory volume on Buddhism and read that book prior to but no later than the first several weeks of the course. At that time, the most popular textbook on Buddhism was *The Buddhist Religion: A Historical Introduction* (1970), written by Richard H. Robinson, but with some editorial input from his literary executor Willard Johnson. Other books which students read to familiarize themselves with the overall Buddhist tradition included Edward Conze's *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development* (1951) and Walpola Rahula's *What the Buddha Taught* (1959). As such, before venturing into any discussions of Western forms of Buddhism, I spent the first several weeks of the course providing a quick, summary background on Buddha's life, his doctrines, and the Buddhist community, as well as additional input on the division of Buddhism into Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna Buddhism and its diaspora into South and Southeast Asia, China, Korea, Japan, and Tibet. In this way, all students were familiar with the materials and terminology that would be utilized throughout the remainder of the course.

Once we concluded our brief review of basic Buddhism, I spent several weeks presenting what limited historical materials I had gathered regarding Buddhism's entry and early development on the North American continent. From the resources available at the time, and the materials shared with me by the various groups I had contacted, it was possible to track Buddhism's entry to the West Coast of the United States following the discovery of gold in California in 1848. Rick Fields would later suggest that by 1860, Chinese immigrants made up approximately 10% of California's population, and the religious tradition of these early immigrants was largely Buddhism. When the Chinese Immigration Exclusion Act was passed in 1882, limiting further Chinese immigration, a wave of Japanese immigrants, also largely Buddhist,

followed. Louise Hunter's book *Buddhism in Hawaii: Its Impact on a Yankee Community* had been published in 1971, so it was possible to get a sense about what their Japanese Jodo Shinshu tradition was like in its first Western morph, and this made it possible to describe a bit about what these Japanese-American Buddhists were like. In addition, there was significant data available about the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, in which many Buddhist figures were present, so the early Buddhist scene could be documented, including the Japanese Immigration Exclusion Act of 1924. I was fortunate enough to have information on the entry of Tibetan Buddhism to the United States because one of my former graduate school pals, Jeffrey Hopkins, had studied with Geshe Ngawang Wangyal at the center he established in Washington, New Jersey, in 1958, and additionally a well-known Tibetan lama named Geshe Lhundup Sopa had joined the faculty at the University of Wisconsin during my graduate school days and provided much information on the growing Tibetan diaspora. By the time of my first courses, Chögyam Trungpa and Tarthang Tulku had both appeared on the American scene, and I gathered much information on these communities. Besides, Trungpa's autobiography *Born in Tibet* had been published in 1966, and was widely available, along with his other early books like *Meditation in Action* (published in 1969). I was also able to present information on the Theravada community in the United States resulting from my frequent visits to the Buddhist Vihara Society in Washington, DC, beginning in 1965, and my personal study with the Sri Lankan monk Bope Vinita.

The historical survey led into the second part of the course in which I highlighted case studies of eight American Buddhist communities or sanghas: Trungpa's Vajradhatu and Nalanda Foundation, Tarthang's Tibetan Nyingma Meditation Center, the San Francisco Zen Center, Shasta Abbey Zen Center, the Buddhist Vihara Society, Buddhist Churches of America, Nichiren Shoshu of America, and the San Francisco-based Gold Mountain Monastery, led by the Chinese monk Hsüan Hua.

At the time, I and others began to move from documenting data to considering the issues associated with the development of American (and Western) Buddhism. It should also be noted that of the above-mentioned communities, the only one that was almost wholly Asian American was the Jodo Shinshu constituency of Buddhist Churches of America. That too would later change.

In this second portion of the course, we also considered the question "Who is a Buddhist?" In its Asian homeland, sectarian affiliation with one of the three major schools of Buddhism was largely determined by geographic location. In North America, it was quite ordinary to find Buddhist groups from each major cultural and sectarian tradition in the same city, and occasionally,

even in the same neighborhood. As such I concluded that a Buddhist is someone who says, "I am a Buddhist." People had a hard time accepting the notion that a Buddhist in America is someone who simply says, "I am a Buddhist" when discussing their perhaps most important personal pursuit. At that time, and prior to my postulate, I also struggled with a long string of other possible choices. Does "taking refuge" establish Buddhist identity? How about membership in a Buddhist community? Does attending meditation sessions, regularly or irregularly, make one a Buddhist? Does donating money to a Buddhist community give one Buddhist identity? What about regular attendance at temple services? Yet no one standard, or combination, would work for everyone. I argued that self-identification was a sane resolution for identifying North American Buddhists, and two decades later, Tom Tweed agreed, and it became, and remains, the standard today. A Buddhist is someone who says, "I am a Buddhist."

In the final portion of the course, we speculated on the future of the Buddhist movement in North America. The chief issue considered was: "Is there a characteristically American style of Buddhism?" At that time I argued that I had made much of the fact that there was a singular relationship between Buddhism's degree of acculturation in its new North American environment and its potential future role in North American religious life. To my way of thinking, there was a clear yardstick by which acculturative growth could be measured, namely, the extent to which American Buddhist groups began to identify with American civil religion. I thought that North American Buddhist groups would be able to participate fully in the North American experience by emphasizing the unique qualities of freedom, equality, and justice, and that it would also be beneficial for North American Buddhist groups to manifest their North American nature in their holiday observances, art, music, ritual life, and so forth. Despite the fact that Buddhism in the United States grew from no more than 100,000 members when I first started teaching my course to perhaps several million adherents by the mid-1990s, offering predictions about its future in the West remained a murky issue in my course. At least by the early 1980s, I was able to assign three fine textbooks: Emma Layman's *Buddhism in America*, Rick Fields's *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, and my own volume *American Buddhism*, as well as a host of supporting articles in popular and scholarly journals.

Throughout the first twenty years of teaching this course, the format and evaluative process remained the same. I taught the course as a seminar, providing my students with as much opportunity for freewheeling question-and-answer class meetings as possible. Evaluation was simple. I assigned five reaction papers spaced evenly throughout the course. These short papers counted five points

each and covered the topics discussed during the time period in question. The remaining seventy-five points were scored by submitting a term paper, having a minimum length of twenty pages. The term paper topics were amazing: case studies of individual Buddhist communities to the influence of the Beats and counterculture on the growing Buddhist movement in the West. Some students even took the serious intellectual risk—with their course grade at stake—of submitting American Buddhist inspired short stories and one-act plays.



Changing Times: 1994–2010

By the time Don Morreale compiled his book *Buddhist America: Centers, Retreats, Practices* in 1988, there were about 500 Buddhist groups in America, and about twice that a decade later when he published the updated version called *The Complete Guide to Buddhist America*. Morreale wasn't wrong when he titled his introductory chapter in this latter volume "Everything Has Changed in Buddhist America." Now, a quick look at the "World Buddhist Directory" at <http://www.buddhanet.net> shows more than 2,500 Buddhist groups in North America, with California alone serving as home to more than 400 groups. Florida, Illinois, and New York have over 100, and British Columbia and Ontario are not far behind, with 92 and 90, respectively, as of this writing. But the growing number of North American Buddhists, and Buddhism's globalization in general, wasn't all that changed in my university seminar in the years from 1994 to 2010.

In the fall of 1994, one incredibly significant event changed the entire focus of my university course, and the courses of many other professors throughout North America. The event was a semester-long symposium created by Professor Kenneth Tanaka and held at the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Berkeley entitled "Buddhisms in America: An Expanding Frontier." I was the keynote speaker who launched the symposium, followed by an array of brilliant scholars who focused on a wide variety of critical topics in North American Buddhism that finally moved beyond the "scenery" and began to actively engage with topics concerning the Buddhist "path." It didn't hurt our efforts that between the months of June and November 1994, features on American Buddhism appeared in such popular print media as the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *Newsweek*, *New York Magazine*, and *Christianity Today*. In addition, American Buddhism was featured in a week-long major feature on the *ABC Nightly News with Peter Jennings*.

By the time of Tanaka's symposium, a cornucopia of scholarly and popular books was beginning to appear on American (and Western) Buddhism,

accompanied and aided by a second generation of Asian and Western Buddhist teachers developing on the scene. These teachers began to appear in seminars and workshops sponsored by individual Buddhist centers throughout the continent, and eventually have constituted what I have fancifully called the “Pro Tour” of American Buddhism. The whole process was aided by the rapid development of the Internet, and this made communication between Buddhist communities much more accessible. The appearance of popular and well-informed Buddhist magazines like *Tricycle* and *Shambhala Sun* further augmented the distribution of useful information for interested followers and students. In fact, by the turn of the century, some estimates placed the number of North American Buddhists as high as six million.

Tanaka and I eventually edited the papers from the conference into the still popular book *The Faces of Buddhism in America*. The book was essentially divided into two sections: (1) “American Buddhist Traditions in Transition”; and (2) “Issues in American Buddhism.” It was the latter category that found its way into my newly structured seminar. While I continued to begin the course with a brief overview of Buddhism, I created a new second section to the course that focused on the issues identified by the 1994 symposium: (1) ethnicity, (2) practice, (3) democratization, (4) engagement, and (5) adaptation. I framed this typology between the two “bookends” of “Who is a Buddhist?” in which I reexamined my earlier hypothesis, and “Ecumenicism,” in which I considered inter-Buddhist and intra-Buddhist communication in the West. The fivefold typology of issues cited above has continued to dominate not only my classroom seminars on Western Buddhism but also the academic courses of many other professors. In the “Buddhism without Borders” conference in Berkeley in 2010, for example, three-fourths of the papers presented dealt with the topics in my typology. Each needs a further elucidation here.

Ethnicity. Probably no issue has been more divisive in the practice and study of North American Buddhism than ethnicity. When I first began teaching about Buddhist sanghas in the United States in the early 1970s, there really were only two kinds of groups to be found: communities of Asian American Buddhists (later to be called Asian immigrant Buddhists by Paul Numrich), and within these communities almost no white, black, or Hispanic faces were visible. On the other hand, there were communities dominated by what Paul Numrich later called American convert Buddhists, and within these communities almost no Asian American, black, or Hispanic faces could be found. Scholars never used these terms in any racist sense at all. They were simply descriptive terms to catalogue who went where. These two forms of

communities rarely, if ever, had any communication with one another. That was why I coined the phrase “two Buddhisms” in 1979. The phrase was meant to delineate one form of Buddhism that placed primary emphasis on sound, basic doctrines, shared by all Buddhists, and on solid traditional practice; and another form of Buddhism that seemed to emerge shortly after radical social movements, similar to what America had experienced in the 1950s and 1960s. At the time, my intention was to find a way for Asian immigrant Buddhists and American convert Buddhists to find a respectful and mutually enhancing way of relating and communicating together, and to find a way for scholars who studied these communities to properly and accurately have a terminology that applied to each community. It wasn’t long before Jan Nattier jumped into the fray, offering her “three Buddhisms” theory of (1) Import Buddhism (also called Elite Buddhism), (2) Export Buddhism (also called Evangelical Buddhism); and (3) Baggage Buddhism (also called Ethnic Buddhism) in *The Faces of Buddhism in America* (1998: 183–195). Once the debate about how many Buddhisms there were in America began, it raced ahead at breakneck speed, and it is still racing.

Practice. Many researchers, me included, have walked into North American Buddhist centers and begun their investigative inquiry with the question, “What’s your practice?” The first time I asked that question was in a Buddhist Churches of America temple. The faithful and respectful Jodo Shinshu practitioner looked at me like I was crazy. She never did answer, but as I watched her over the next several days, I learned that her identity as a Buddhist and her identity as a person were inseparable. In the nearly forty years since that initial observation, my experience with Asian immigrant Buddhists has been almost identical to that initial meeting. On the other hand, when I visit North American convert sanghas, I almost always get an immediate, and different, response: meditation. Indeed, the specific form of meditation, such as Zen or Vipassanā, varies, but the focus on meditation remains immediate. If I then push back a little, and ask some specific questions about what other aspects of Buddhist practice they might do, there is usually very little response, almost as if Buddhism for them was a monolithic “Meditation-Yāna” tradition.

Many Buddhist scholars and practitioners have correctly defined North American Buddhism as an essentially lay Buddhist tradition. North America has never been a monastic culture, but to focus exclusively on the lay Buddhist tradition overlooks the immensely critical role Buddhist monastics have played throughout Buddhism’s history in Asia. It is no accident that more and more monastic centers are growing up throughout North America, and an increasing number of American Buddhists—men and women—are choosing

the monastic vocation as a means of making Buddhist practice the focal point of their lives. While this is no insignificant issue, it is not free from dilemmas, for the monastic code for monks and nuns, known as the *Vinaya*, was essentially written for a religious environment that is two millennia old . . . and no longer entirely applicable to our modern lifestyle. As a result, the code itself, and the degree to which it is enforced, has become problematic. Many Western Buddhist monastic centers have had to incorporate many exceptions into the detailed rules, and my suspicion is that it will not be too much longer before the commentarial tradition, which died out 1,500 years ago, will be reawakened. Additionally, as early as 1970, Suzuki Rōshi commented on the problematic of the choice between a lay or monastic life in America, noting that “American students are not priests yet not completely layman.” He went on: “I think you are special people and want some special practice that is not exactly priest’s practice and not exactly a layman’s practice” (Suzuki 1970: 133).

I think it is important to understand that Asian immigrant Buddhists value and utilize ritual practices, chanting, and faith-based observances, contrasting with how convert communities emphasize sitting meditation. Yet the mental focus and concentration required to carry out ritual practice in the proper fashion is as demanding as *shamatha* meditation. Furthermore, since all Buddhists are obliged to follow the five vows of the lay practitioner, focus on “precepts as practice” can bridge the gap between the Asian immigrant and American convert communities. One cannot overestimate the importance of ethical concerns for the entire Buddhist community globally. In the more than 2,500 years since Buddha’s ministry, the foundational ethical rules inherited by American Buddhists have been applied to contextual circumstances never considered during Buddha’s lifetime, like abortion, euthanasia, and bio-ethics.

Democratization. Most people involved with North American Buddhist communities would probably agree that the ancient Buddhist tradition was hardly a democratic organization. But parts of it, despite being profoundly patriarchal, were. A quick study of the *Vinaya* code governing the monastic institution shows that the sangha was profoundly democratic in its institutional functioning. Nonetheless, the ancient Buddhist community was also primarily hierarchical and highly authoritarian with respect to leadership roles; and that is what was transmitted to America. The recent movement toward democratization in the North American Buddhist community was hastened, as many people now know, by a rather public series of scandals involving both Asian masters and the first generation of North American teachers. The days in which North American Buddhist communities were headed by male Asian masters who had virtually unlimited authority are long gone, but early

in their teaching mission here, these Asian masters passed on their lineages to a generation of Western successors. As such, there are second- and even third-generation Western Buddhist masters in the overall North American sangha, with some writers asserting that there are now more female teachers than males.

More important, many North American Buddhist sanghas are now managed by a collective governing body. This democratic pattern also now seems to generally be guided by the principle that Rita Gross referred to as “natural hierarchy,” in which community members simply work at those tasks most suited to their interests and abilities, irrespective of gender. This approach makes all roles valuable learning experiences. A final item that has moved North American Buddhism safely forward in the aftermath of the well-publicized teacher-related scandals of the 1970s and 1980s is a much tighter regulation of the conduct allowed between teachers and students in North American Buddhist communities.

Also influenced by the changing patterns of authority in North American Buddhist communities is the impact changing gender roles have had on these same communities. While Rita Gross’s important book *Buddhism after Patriarchy* spearheaded the issue of women’s roles in building a post-patriarchal Buddhism generally, many other Buddhist women—in both the lay and monastic communities—have carried the issue aggressively forward. Much notoriety for lifestyle issues has recently been in the news. Nonetheless, the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people are a significant issue in North American culture, and as such, it is no surprise that many members of the self-professed “queer community” are finding their way into North American Buddhist sanghas. Before his death in 2007, retired Duke University professor Roger Corless did much to educate the North American Buddhist community about issues critical to the queer community. Now groups like the “Gay Buddhist Fellowship” provide resources that were totally absent just a generation earlier.¹

Engagement. Back in 1992, *Tricycle* editor Helen Tworok said that, “Just now, ours is not predominantly a Buddhism of removed monasticism. It is out of robes, in the streets, in institutions, workplaces, and homes” (1992: 4). It would not be too far a stretch to assume that her statement was an endorsement of what has come to be known as “socially engaged Buddhism.” Now, many American Buddhists are well aware that one creator of socially engaged Buddhism is the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh. This movement was contrary to the stereotype of Buddhism as a socially passive tradition, removed or withdrawn from the rigors of society. (Tom Tweed even postulated that

Buddhism made only tiny inroads into North American culture during the Victorian period for precisely this reason.) Yet only a century later, socially engaged Buddhists have combined Buddhist values with distinctly North American forms of social protest emphasizing peace issues, ecological and environmental concerns, hospice work, prison reforms, and other concerns in an attempt to inject Buddhist-inspired sanity into our dialogue with the planet and each other. Active social engagement has become so prevalent in defining North American Buddhism that Christopher Queen has even suggested in the Introduction to his edited volume *Engaged Buddhism in the West* (1999) that it should be considered the newest and fourth “Yāna” (or vehicle) in the overall Buddhist tradition. In North America, a leading advocate of socially engaged Buddhism is the Buddhist Peace Fellowship; a trans-sectarian organization that was founded in 1978, it now has chapters in nearly every state in the United States, every province in Canada, and throughout the world.

Adaptation. When I published *American Buddhism*, I saved North American Buddhism’s acculturation for the conclusion. When Ken Tanaka and I replaced the term acculturation with the newer phrase “adaptation” in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, it was clear that North American Buddhist communities, and especially Asian immigrant Buddhists, were examining their ritual life, methods of teaching and learning, and institutions in hopes of maintaining their presence and successfully enculturating their children. Some Buddhists, like Victor Hori, were not at all convinced these first attempts at accommodation were especially helpful. He suggested, for example, that American Zen had created, in addition to its distinct practices, a series of enterprises that Japanese Zen never imagined: residential communities, businesses, farms, hospices, publishing companies, Dharmacraft cottage industries, and the like. It is not unreasonable to wonder whether these innovations were a new and important kind of Zen practice or simply a distraction from it.



New Developments and Case Studies

The course continued with presentations devoted to the various geographic Buddhisms transplanted to the West: Japanese, Chinese, Tibetan, and South/Southeast Asian traditions. I continued to utilize case studies of individual Buddhist groups to highlight the various traditions. However, while I again focused on Buddhist Churches of America, the Nichiren Shoshu tradition (now called Soka Gakkai International-USA), and Chögyam Trungpa’s

communities (now called Shambhala International), I added new communities to my presentation: Zen Mountain Monastery in Mt. Tremper, New York, the Hsi Lai Temple in Hacienda Heights, California, the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, and the Buddhist Peace Fellowship in Berkeley, California. I also added a consideration of “cybersanghas,” or those Buddhist communities that existed only in cyberspace and not in real geographic space, as well as the role of the Internet in assisting existing Buddhist communities in facilitating ongoing communication among its sangha members.

In exploring the role of these individual communities, I also introduced a new topic to the discussion: “scholar-practitioners.” I adopted this term in the early 1990s to categorize Buddhist scholars with sophisticated academic degrees and professional backgrounds, but who were also Buddhist practitioners, sometimes known only to each other and not the administrative structure of their home university. These scholar-practitioners were rapidly coming to play a large role in teaching courses on Buddhism in general and Western Buddhism in particular, as well as providing useful assistance to individual Buddhist communities on the continent. Precisely because Western Buddhist communities were not especially likely to have a significant monastic component, the monks and nuns who were largely the culture bearers of the tradition in Asia were absent here. As such, the burgeoning number of scholar-practitioners assumed that role in the development of Western forms of Buddhism. Surveys I conducted privately in 1993 and 1995 indicated to me that perhaps more than one-half of all Buddhist studies scholars in North America fell into the new category of scholar-practitioner, and I shared this topic, and its implications, with my students.

In the final portion of the course, after 1994 it was becoming clear that it was no longer applicable to blindly assume that all forms of Western Buddhism were identical, or even similar. On this continent, the Buddhist traditions that were developing in Canada and in Mexico were clearly different from that in the United States, and those in metropolitan areas were not identical to those in rural communities.



An Eye to the Future: Emerging Topics and Perspectives

Although I retired in 2010, there are clearly a few changes I would make teaching the course going forward. I would not tamper with the overall structure of the course, but I would indeed change some items in the second and third

major sections of the course. I would change each of the “bookends” mentioned previously. Now that most scholars have accepted the notion that a Buddhist is someone who indicates he/she is a Buddhist—that is, someone who self-identifies as a Buddhist—that bookend is no longer appropriate. In its place, I would shift to the notion of “Regionalism” as proposed by Jeff Wilson,² who has suggested that we have not paid enough attention to geographical borders and boundaries in investigations of North American Buddhism. As in other studies of American religions in which geographic studies have clarified the diversities within these traditions, Wilson accounts for differences between Americans in different parts of the United States, on rural versus metropolitan areas, and pragmatic differences within Buddhist sectarian communities based on their location. He wonders about the differences between various teachers, within the same lineage, but who are located in different areas of the country. He also explores how such issues within regionalism as climate and terrain and environmental concerns impact various North American Buddhist communities.

The concluding “bookend” that I proposed in my earlier work was “ecumenicism.” Because I relied heavily on sociologist of religion Peter Berger’s claim that pluralistic cultural conditions lead to a “market situation” in which religious monopolies could no longer take their client communities for granted. And since one of the by-products of pluralistic situations is ecumenicity, in which religious communication and collaboration occurred between religions and within traditions, ecumenicism seemed like a fruitful pathway into North American Buddhist culture. It now seems important to amend this bookend in order to include the larger, global Buddhist environment, what I have called the “Global Buddhist Dialogue.” As Buddhism continues to globalize, and the study of Western Buddhism has developed into its own, vital sub-discipline of Buddhist studies, advances in technology have enabled North American Buddhist groups to not only communicate across regional boundaries in their own continent, but across continental boundaries as well. This is additionally important because the teaching lineages and communities of important ancient and modern Buddhist teachers have become worldwide enterprises. Global Buddhist dialogue enables modern Western Buddhism to truly be involved in productive boundary crossing. As such, global Buddhist dialogue helps to unravel the complexities of religious identity in an ever-shrinking, but increasingly alienating world.

With respect to practice, the second factor in my typology, what is rarely mentioned in discussing Buddhist practice is the issue of *Buddhist family life*. To the best of my knowledge, the only Buddhist publication that devotes a regular column to Buddhist family life and parenting is *Turning Wheel*,

published by the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. The issue of Buddhist parenting and family life cannot be overlooked because many of the young North American Buddhist converts, and many of the latest generation of Asian immigrant Buddhists, now find themselves raising the next generation of American Buddhists. One of these “*Dharma brats*” is Sumi Loundon Kim, born into a small Sōtō Zen community in New Hampshire in 1975. Her interest in Buddhist family life prompted her to publish an edited book in 2001 called *Blue Jean Buddha: Voices of Young Buddhists*, with about thirty short sections written by young Buddhists. Five years later she followed up with *The Buddha’s Apprentices: More Voices of Young Buddhists*. At the end of her second book, in a section called “Looking Ahead,” she tells her own story, addressing the issue of how to infuse Buddhist practice into the lives of young Buddhists. She postulates three things that might secure a sane Buddhist environment, and practice, for our future generations. First, she hopes the overall Buddhist community will continue to create a welcoming atmosphere in individual Buddhist communities. Second, Buddhist communities need to create participatory roles designed to energize young people. Finally, and most important, she stresses the need for Buddhist communities to address the psychological needs of youngsters.

With regard to adaptation, I would spend time focusing on “hybridity,” as it has become one of the new topics in the study of North American Buddhism. Scholars now more clearly understand the connections between adaptation and hybridity in the various traditions of North American Buddhism. In the context of inter-religious and intra-religious hybridity, the issue of adaptation in North American Buddhism becomes not only significantly more complicated but also more interesting. It is now possible to vary the Buddhist communities highlighted in the second portion of the course, aiming to reflect the constantly changing and growing diversity in Western forms of Buddhism.

Finally, there are new elements in looking to the future of Western Buddhism. First has been a huge development of Buddhist educational institutions in North America. Here I don’t mean only the Buddhist institutions of higher learning, like Naropa University, Nyingma Institute, University of the West, and Soka University of America, but also Buddhist high schools and elementary schools, such as the Developing Virtue Secondary School, founded by the Dharma Realm Buddhist Association in 1981 and the Pacific Buddhist Academy in Honolulu, founded in 2003. These educational institutions will not only contribute to the next generation of Buddhist studies scholars, but will also promote the ongoing development of Buddhist literacy in North America. Second, just as with the Buddhist studies academic community, the influence of technology will continue spreading. Social networking sites make it infinitely

easier for Buddhist individuals and communities to establish and maintain contacts with one another, and the web pages of individual Buddhist communities serve to break down the geographic and regional barriers mentioned earlier. Perhaps the technological innovation that may have the biggest impact on the practice of North American Buddhism is the creation of blogs. Some North American Buddhists are already using the creative term “Buddhist Blogosphere.” There are some relatively stable blogs, and they tell us an enormous amount about how this new form of instant, and far-reaching, communication has influenced both the study and practice of North American Buddhism.



Annotated Bibliography on Major Sources and Geographical Regions

There are only two general resources that properly and creatively address the issue of Buddhism beyond Asia. The first of these is Stephen Batchelor’s book *The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture* (1994). It is thorough, provocative, and creative. Its only major drawback is that it focuses almost solely on Europe, and thus excludes the Americas. The other, and more complete volume of this type, is *Westward Dharma: Buddhism beyond Asia* (2002), edited by Martin Baumann and myself. This volume describes the landscape of global Buddhism, explores the histories of Buddhism in specific Western countries, considers adaptations and innovations in Western Buddhist traditions, explores Buddhist lifestyles in Western societies, and considers new challenges. It also presents a thorough bibliography that is complete through 1999.

There are at least eight major surveys that focus exclusively on Buddhism in the United States. The three earliest include Emma Layman’s *Buddhism in America* (1976), my own *American Buddhism* (1979), and Rick Fields’s *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* (1981). Each of these is interesting, but limited by its early publication in that it does more tracking and locating than analyzing. *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, edited by Kenneth Tanaka and myself, was published in 1998 and is a landmark text among edited volumes. A second highly useful edited volume is *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship* (1999). Edited by Christopher Queen and Duncan Ryūken Williams, it contains papers from a Harvard Buddhist Studies Forum in 1997. The two leading monographs on American Buddhism are my own book *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America* (1999) and Richard Seager’s *Buddhism in America* (1999). These two volumes cover the

entire roadmap of Buddhism in the United States, highlighting Buddhist communities, practices, trends, and a forward glimpse to the turn of the new century. Somewhat different than the above is James Coleman's *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition*, published in 2000. Written from a sociological perspective, it is the only volume listed that offers statistical data on American Buddhist communities.

There are two volumes devoted to Buddhism in Canada. The first of these is *Buddhism in Canada*, edited by Bruce Matthews and published in 2006. It contains chapters by Canada's early researchers into the various Western Buddhist traditions. This was followed in 2010 by *Wild Geese: Buddhism in Canada*, edited by John Harding, Victor Hori, and Alexander Soucy. It is significantly more varied and thorough than the first volume, considering both traditions and trends in Canadian Buddhism. It will likely remain the book of choice on Canadian Buddhism for the near future.

The leading book on Buddhism in South America is Cristina Rocha's *Zen in Brazil: The Quest for Cosmopolitan Modernity* published in 2006. Rocha has also authored several seminal articles on Buddhism in Brazil. Additionally, she has teamed up with Michelle Barker to publish *Buddhism in Australia: Tradition in Change* in 2010. This continues the earlier work of Barker (then named Michelle Spuler), who published *Facets of the Diamond: Developments in Australian Buddhism* in 2002. Along with *The Buddhists in Australia*, written by Enid Adam and Philip J. Hughes, and published in 1996, these are must reads for Buddhism "down under."

There are at least three volumes that should be consulted for accurate and reliable information on Buddhism in Great Britain. First there is Ian Oliver's early and preliminary volume *Buddhism in Britain*, published in 1979. This was followed by Philip Almond's well-received and often cited book *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (1988). Finally, and most up to date is Robert Bluck's 2008 text, *British Buddhism, Teachings, Practice and Development*. Finding useful publications on Buddhism in the various European countries is a much more difficult task than locating the volumes listed above. Perhaps the most useful source is Martin Baumann's (1995) insightful article "Creating a European Path to Buddhism: Historical and Contemporary Developments of Buddhism in Europe."

Perhaps the "stage setter" for inquiries into issues in aspects of the Western Buddhist tradition is Thomas Tweed's *The American Encounter with Buddhism: 1844–1912*, published in 1992. It surveys the way in which Buddhism first found its way into American culture, and then how it was initially received. The following year, my own article "Two Buddhisms Reconsidered," opened further inquiries into the ethnicity of North American Buddhists. Articles such as Rich Fields's "Confessions of a White Buddhist," published in

the 1994 magazine *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, kept the discourse moving, with a new pinnacle article in scholar-practitioner Shannon Wakoh Hickey's article, "Two Buddhisms, Three Buddhisms, and Racism," published in the 2010 issue of the *Journal of Global Buddhism*. Hickey's article is by far the most complete on this topic, respectfully surveying all of the contributions on this topic by the leading scholars in the field and concluding with her own plea to move beyond analytical categories she considers to be racist.

Gender and lifestyle issues have become a major consideration in the study of Western Buddhism. There is no better volume devoted to changing gender roles in Buddhism than Rita Gross's seminal volume *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*, published 1993. Apart from offering her theory of "natural hierarchy," Gross emphasizes the critical role of women in Western forms of Buddhism. She followed this up with an article titled "Helping the Iron Bird Fly: Western Buddhist Women and Issues of Authority in the Late 1990s," published in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*. Along with volumes like Sandy Boucher's *Turning the Wheel: American Women Creating the New Buddhism* (1988), these efforts opened new fields of scholarly analysis. Because of the large number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender practitioners in Western forms of Buddhism, one should not overlook Winston Leyland's edited volume *Queer Dharma: Voices of Gay Buddhists* (2000).

Because the Chinese Buddhist tradition is the earliest to appear in North America, there are at least two essential readings for all students of Western Buddhism. The first is Irene Lin's stimulating article "Journey to the Far West: Chinese Buddhism in America" (1996). The second is Stuart Chandler's interpretive chapter called "Chinese Buddhism in America: Identity and Practice," published in *The Faces of Buddhism in America* (1998).

The Japanese came next, and one should absolutely be sure to examine at least the Jodo Shinsu, Soka Gakkai, and Zen traditions. Although written more than thirty years ago, Tetsuden Kashima's *Buddhism in America: The Social Organization of an Ethnic Religious Institution* remains the classic volume. It is written from a sociological point of view, but includes rich historical information in its text. Almost a decade later, Donald Tuck published *Buddhist Churches of America: Jodo Shinshu* (1987). For Soka Gakkai, the most valuable and comprehensive titles, also including much sociological data, are Bryan Wilson and Karel Dobbelaere's *A Time to Chant: The Soka Gakkai Buddhists in Britain* (1994) and Phillip Hammond and David Machacek's *Soka Gakkai in America: Accommodation and Conversion* (1999). Because there are so many different titles in both the scholarly and popular tradition, it is very difficult to pick one or two outstanding Zen titles, but two of my favorites are Kenneth

Kraft's article "Recent Developments in North American Zen," in his edited volume titled *Zen: Tradition and Transition* (1988), and Helen Tworokov's book *Zen in America: Profiles of Five Teachers* (1994).

Just as with Zen, there are literally dozens of books on various aspects of the Tibetan tradition in America, ranging from primary sources by Tibetan masters, such as Chögyam Trungpa's *Meditation in Action* (1969) or *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism* (1973), to secondary works by Buddhist studies academics. Amy Lavine's survey article, "Tibetan Buddhism in America: The Development of American Vajrayana," published in *The Faces of Buddhism in America* (1988), is a good place to start. So is Lama Surya Das's *Awakening the Buddha Within: Tibetan Wisdom for the Western World* (1997). However, I would also recommend, for both informational as well as fun reading Stephen Butterfield's *The Double Mirror: A Skeptical Journey into Buddhist Tantra* (1994), and David Swick's *Thunder and Ocean: Shambhala & Buddhism in Nova Scotia* (1996).

For the Theravāda tradition, there is nothing better than Paul Numrich's still valuable work *Old Wisdom in the New World: Americanization in Two Immigrant Theravada Buddhist Temples* (1996). Only Wendy Cadge's recent book *Heartwood: The First Generation of Theravada Buddhism in America* (2004) deserves to be mentioned along with Numrich's brilliant book.

Notes

1. In his chapter in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, titled "Coming Out in the Sangha: Queer Community in American Buddhism" (253–265), Roger Corless emphasized that in welcoming the queer community into North American Buddhism, we must: (1) create a safe environment in which to practice; (2) create an environment in which practitioners from the various traditions can meet, share viewpoints, and be mutually supportive; (3) provide a community that is socially and psychologically supportive; (4) offer compassion through social action; and (5) offer a place to explore the degree to which Buddhism does, or does not, meet members' spiritual needs.
2. Jeff Wilson, "Mapping the American Buddhist Terrain: Paths Taken and Possible Itineraries," *Religion Compass* 3, posted on September 21, 2009.

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*Conveying Buddhism in the Classroom*WORKING WITH ASSUMPTIONS
ON FAMILY AND CHILDREN*Vanessa R. Sasson**Introduction*

A few years ago, I conducted a research project on the politics of women's ordination in Sri Lanka. Although neither the state nor most monastic organizations recognize women's higher ordination for a variety of complicated reasons, thousands of women have donned the orange robes and chosen to live a life of renunciation anyway. Some of these women have chosen to take higher ordination for themselves, regardless of state disapproval, while the rest—still the majority at this point—continue to live as renunciants, but without ordination. The academic goal during my time in Sri Lanka was to explore the question of ordination with non-ordained renunciant women, in order to better understand how some were interpreting the situation they found themselves in.¹

While conducting interviews, I stayed focused on the technical aspects of ordination—sometimes to the interview subjects' inevitable boredom—but whenever I dropped my pen and allowed more natural interactions to develop, topics rose to the surface that I could not have anticipated. One point that kept returning was the fact that many of the women I interviewed continued to maintain relationships with their biological families. Contrary to my assumption, none of the women I interviewed interpreted their renunciation as a radical severing of all of their previous relationships. Their renunciation may have redefined how they managed those relationships, but it did not cancel the fact of them. Although they had become renunciants, the women I interviewed were still daughters, sisters, and friends. In some cases, they were mothers and grandmothers too. I remember

one woman boasting to me that her children visited her every Sunday. This was a very different picture from what I had come into the field expecting. I had never thought of renunciants as boastful mothers before.

The question I have been asking myself ever since is, why? Why hadn't the thought ever occurred to me that renunciants might still feel connected to their families or boast about their children? Why hadn't I ever asked the question? And where was the scholarship? The fact that I had never taken such questions seriously before speaks volumes about the assumptions I had been operating under. While in Sri Lanka, I had assumed that one of the most important issues for female renunciants would be the question of higher ordination, and to some extent I was not wrong. It is an important issue that is at the source of many vibrant discussions on the island and in the wider community throughout the Buddhist world.

What is strange is that I never considered the possibility that the women I was interviewing might have things to say about family as well. I assumed that family had been left behind, that when such women had shaved their heads, they had shaved away all attachments. That was, at least, the technical declaration being made with the vow of renunciation, but what I failed to realize was that technical declarations rarely tell the whole story. Family ties are bound to be important for renunciants, just as they are for everyone else.

It is difficult to admit such a blind spot in my own research agenda. It is all the more embarrassing (or paradoxically wonderful) that this kind of blind spot is precisely what I warn my students about before they embark upon the study of Buddhism. Every semester, I open my Eastern Religions class with a lecture about the risks of pre-established assumptions. I talk about the importance of knowing what we have come into the classroom with, because if the mind is already filled with preset conclusions, there can be no room for new perspectives and the very exercise that is education becomes a waste of time. It is a lecture I deliver to students in the hopes of creating some space before we begin, and yet there I was in Sri Lanka, in dire need of hearing that very lecture myself. I entered my research project with a similarly preset perspective. Whenever references were made to family in my discussions with renunciant women, I put down my pen. It was not the point of the interview.



The Challenge of Pre-set Assumptions

Over the years, hundreds of students have traveled through my classroom. They are all different, with their own stories, backgrounds, and realities.

Buddhism must mean different things to each one. I am quite certain, for example, that a Sri Lankan Tamil student registers for one of my courses with a very different set of expectations about Buddhism than a Western student who goes on regular Buddhist retreats, or a Chinese student who has recently immigrated to Canada. Any sweeping generalization about the students I have worked with over the years is necessarily inaccurate. That being said, however, these students do have one thing in common: whether they have just arrived from China, were raised in a strict Tamil Sri Lankan household, or their family has been in Canada for generations, all of them currently live in a context that generally thinks quite highly of—and often uncritically about—Buddhism.

At the beginning of an introductory class, I usually ask students what comes to mind when they hear the word “Buddha” or “Buddhist.” I urge them to throw out the first words that pop into their heads, or to share anything they have learned in other classes. The following scenario arises regularly: students who have some background may exclaim “*nirvāṇa*” or “*karma*.” Some have a sense of the story of the Buddha, that he was a Prince who became “enlightened.” Those with a bit more background might call out that he “rejected the caste system” (although rarely with any nuance on that front). For those with virtually no exposure to Buddhism, the words that chime out from the collection of raised hands always include something to the effect of “peaceful,” “kind,” “a way of life,” and eventually . . . “natural.” Whenever that last one arises, I try to suppress my surging reaction.²

When the list of sweet things has run its course, I usually ask the students if words like “terrorist” or “fundamentalist” ever come to mind and I am greeted with looks of puzzlement and confusion. It is then that I deliver the lecture on pre-established conclusions. If students assume that everything about Buddhism is sweet, that it is a philosophy about how to be a good person and nothing more, then there is no point in going any further. Their minds are already made up and the exercise that is education will fail. If, however, they can recognize their preset worldview, they are more likely to be open to challenging themselves and expanding their understanding. The point of my lecture is to urge them to know their own mental framework before we begin . . . just as I should have known my own before I landed in Sri Lanka.

Somewhere along the way, I ask the students another question. Is Buddhism for children? This question is usually experienced as a kind of curveball and it takes them a few minutes to recalibrate.

“What do you mean, ‘is it for children?’” someone invariably asks.

“Well, is this religion meant for children? Or is it something best left to adults?”

A bit of shuffling ensues, a little head-scratching here and there, and eventually . . . blank stares. It turns out that for most of them, the question itself

makes no sense. How could Buddhism be for children? It may be sweet, but it is simultaneously interpreted as a practice that only adults are capable of undertaking. In other words, Buddhism is somehow characterized as being cuddly yet complicated. An adult mind is required to wrestle through its sophisticated philosophical system, and a still (un-wriggly) body is required to sit through hours of meditation—all of which, of course, will lead to an ultimately child-like kindness in the end (which is the part that makes Buddhism “sweet”). How can children be expected to participate in all of that? They can’t sit still and they can’t follow sophisticated philosophical theorizing.

This is when another assumption comes crashing against the classroom walls: Buddhism is not usually seen as a religion (despite the fact that it makes it into almost every World Religions course). Bookstores throughout North America still place Buddhist literature in the “eastern philosophy” section (I have encountered this even in university bookstores). Rather, Buddhism is for many people a “way of life”—one that apparently only adults can attempt to participate in. It is not a religion to be passed down from one generation to the next, and thus it is not something associated with children and families. It is for serious adults who have time to study and meditate.

I am not suggesting that Buddhism is not for serious adults who want to study and meditate, but the question I find myself wrestling with is why Buddhism seems to be restricted to the “serious adult” category, leaving everyone else out. Why is it that after more than a century of constructive Buddhist scholarship in the West, Buddhism is still met with such limited expectation? After all, even the briefest visit to a Buddhist country will rectify that impression. Children are everywhere in the Buddhist world—as indeed they are everywhere else too. Why then, have we left them out of our field of vision?



Religious Illiteracy

I think there are a few ways to answer this question. To begin with, there is the generalized phenomenon of religious illiteracy to contend with,³ which has nothing to do with Buddhism specifically. Although everyone has an opinion when it comes to religion, only a fraction will have dedicated themselves to learning about religions, and even fewer still will have developed critical skills with which to discuss the topic seriously. Part of this may be the product of a growing anti-intellectualism trailing through North American culture; part of this is connected to the tug of war playing itself out between fundamentalism and secularism on the world stage; and part must be the product of a

tweeting generation, with everything worth knowing having to be articulated in 140-character statements. These explanations (along with many others) help explain why most people I meet (in the classroom and outside of it) have very limited religious literacy. We do not live in a cultural climate that encourages the alternative.⁴

I do not think, however, that these cultural trends are exclusively at fault for the religious illiteracy I seem to encounter so regularly. The information explosion, which began with the printing press more than five hundred years ago and continues unrelentingly, must also be hailed as a potential explanation. As much as I would like to bemoan my students' limited exposure to the world, the fact is that there is simply too much to know or to keep up with now. Although I wish my students (and everyone else) dedicated themselves to the field of religious studies as devotedly as I have, the reality is necessarily bound to be different, if for no other reason than the fact that there are so many more books to read than ever before. I remember visiting the Portuguese university town of Coimbra a few years ago and being struck by the difference two centuries can make. The exquisite Joanina Library had 250,000 volumes in the eighteenth century. It was one of the biggest collections in the world at the time, and it fit into one building. By comparison, McGill University has approximately fourteen libraries on its campus⁵ today and includes a total of 2,213,458 print volumes.⁶ Add to this all the virtual materials now available, and the number expands exponentially. McGill University is, moreover, just one of the four major universities in the city of Montreal, all of which have comparable collections. Combine this with the city's many colleges (Marianopolis College included), and Montreal can boast of having many millions of books and articles at its disposal. To bemoan the general public's limited understanding of a particular religious tradition is to some degree unfair when such numbers are taken into consideration. The amount of things to know is astonishing. It is also superbly humbling.⁷

When students enter my classroom with a limited understanding of Buddhism, my response must be welcoming. I might feel frustrated by the repetitious nature of my experience; I might want to growl (at times) when students yet again express wide-eyed adoration for a religious tradition they know virtually nothing about. But if I am to be honest with my own limitations, with all the things I know virtually nothing about, I cannot complain. There is so much to know. The fact that my students don't know much about Buddhism is simply the reason for their taking the course. . . . After all, if they were well-read on the topic, why bother with it?



Protestant Presuppositions

The question does remain, however: Why is it that the limited impression students do often come into the classroom with is that Buddhism is a philosophy for adults and not a religious tradition for a wider community? How did Buddhism earn this particular reputation at this particular time in the West?

The academic community has been asking itself about the history of its own assumptions for a long time, with Gananath Obeyesekere's (1970) pivotal article, "Religious Symbolism and Political Change in Ceylon," leading the way. Obeyesekere challenged his readers with what he saw as strong Protestant influence permeating Buddhist interpretations, and scholarship has been injecting itself with a healthy dose of self-doubt about scholarly biases ever since. One of the most persistent assumptions hidden inside the pages of Western scholarship has been our adoption of *sola scriptura* as the primary methodology. For the past century or more, we have been prioritizing the textual study of the tradition above almost everything else, and despite Obeyesekere's warnings (shared by many other prominent voices since⁸), that methodology has been particularly difficult to shed. This is especially the case when attempting to construct a socio-historical portrait of Buddhism.

In the opening chapter of his recent book, *Family Matters in Indian Buddhist Monasticisms*, Shayne Clarke argues that it is the priority of the *Khaggavisana Sutta* in particular—the "Rhinoceros (horn) Sutta"—that has led us to assume that textual accounts of adult asceticism form the primary representation of "true Buddhist life" (2013: 1–10). The *Khaggavisana Sutta*⁹ is without a doubt an important early text. It appears three times in the Pali Canon, once in the Sanskrit text of the *Mahāvastu*, and was discovered as a separate scroll among the Kharosthi fragments in northwest India. It is virtually unanimously recognized as belonging to the earliest strata of Buddhist literature. Indeed, this text is deemed to have been so significant among early writings that it has led some scholars to conclude that it circulated as an independent *sutta* long before it was included into any canon (Solomon 2000: 14–15).

In the *Khaggavisana Sutta*, the Buddha praises the lifestyle of the lonely ascetic wanderer, advising his listeners to remain unhindered and unattached, and encouraging them to roam free like a rhinoceros (or its horn, depending on one's translation). The text repeatedly warns its audience of the dangers of attachment and encourages its adherents to leave everything behind—including family:

Leaving behind son and wife, and father and mother, and wealth and grain, and relatives and sensual pleasures to the limit, one should wander solitary as a rhinoceros [horn].” (SN I.60)¹⁰

Clarke makes the convincing argument that it is precisely this particular image of the monk from this particular *sutta* that has dominated Western imaginings. When textual priority is combined with a text like this, it is not difficult to see how we have come to assume that “real” Buddhism is about radical separation from one’s family. As this text evokes so well, the true renunciant wanders alone; family is left behind.

The idea of radical renunciation is important in Buddhist discourse. The *Khaggavisana Sutta* is obviously not the only text to encourage its audience to abandon all attachments. Abandoning attachment is a central Buddhist principle that features on virtually every page of every text, but other textual voices concerning non-attachment do not assume the same kind of radical severing of family ties. Indeed, if we read the chapter that comes immediately before the *Khaggavisana Sutta* in the *Sutta-Nipata*, the chapter entitled *Dhaniya*, we find a passage dedicated to advising a lay couple. This couple is not told to abandon each other or their presumed families in order to be able to benefit from the teachings. They are, rather, counseled as a householder couple and the husband responds to the Buddha’s words with the following affirmation:

My wife and I are attentive. Let us practice the holy life in the presence of the Well-farer. . . . Let us put an end to misery. (SN I. 32)

There is no indication in this response that, as a result of the Buddha’s teaching, the couple will dissolve their relationship. Given the fact that this text belongs to one of the first three chapters of the *Sutta-Nipata*, there is every reason to believe that the perspective embodied in this section is important. Somehow, though, scholarship has regularly overlooked this perspective in favor of the roaming and solitary rhinoceros instead.

Of course, textual prioritization and the *Khaggavisana Sutta* are not exclusively responsible for our ongoing expectation that Buddhism features lone, adult ascetics more than anything else. The central Buddhist narrative—the story of the Buddha—can produce precisely the same result. In that story, the Buddha abandons his own family in order to pursue his quest for awakening. He leaves his family behind (which according to many hagiographies causes his family members great distress) and opts for the life of a rhinoceros (or its horn) instead. After achieving awakening, the Buddha forms a community that consists of many of those very same family members he had once left behind. Nevertheless, one of the most dramatic turning points in his hagiography consists of the Great Departure, when he abandons family—in some texts the very same day his son was born—to pursue a quest for spiritual understanding through isolated renunciation.

Buddhism highlights the benefits of non-attachment regularly in its rhetoric and rarely praises the benefits of procreation or family ties. It is not surprising that we have come to the conclusion that Buddhism is in fact a tradition focused on adult renunciation. But is it really? We have become so accustomed to thinking about Buddhism in its ascetic representations that we seem to have forgotten that all Buddhist communities are filled with families and that there are all kinds of traditions that include those families as practitioners. Indeed, how could a religious community survive time without families' enculturating children over the generations? The research emerging on Buddhism and family demonstrates in a variety of ways that the family has an important role to play in this tradition; it is about time our courses reflect this historical truth.



Reasonable Individualism

Protestant presuppositions have not created this lacuna on their own. Our increasingly individualistic worldview has also contributed to our current interpretation of the tradition. Buddhism is regularly paraded as a reasonable alternative to the faith traditions of the West in popular discourse. I have often heard students express the idea that Buddhism is somehow not like "other" religions, that it is reasonable, philosophical, and above all highly individual. The perception seems to be that Buddhism is focused on encouraging adults to undertake a personal quest for awakening. It is therefore a tradition that does not require ritual or community effort, and it cannot be forced onto children because it is something that one must arrive at by one's own efforts, as an adult. Rita Gross has expressed this viewpoint of Buddhism being defined by its virtuosos. In her view, the core Buddhist space is not "the fields, the hearth, the sacramental table, the sacrificial altar, or the bazaar,"¹¹ as it is in so many other religions. It is the meditation hall, where adult individuals quietly do their inner work.

These assumptions fill my classroom with hope and anticipation. Students eagerly wait for these views to be confirmed and explained. Many of my students seem to hope that somehow, Buddhism will not disappoint them, disparage their identities or sexual orientation, their gender, or their personal histories. They want something to hold onto and to believe in. In other words, Buddhism is often held onto as a potential antidote to their pain (I realize, of course, the irony of this argument . . .).

They are not alone in this. It is not just a mark of their age that students expect Buddhism to be the answer they are looking for. I have encountered many adults with similar expectations. When a friend once remarked to me

that “at least Buddhism is reasonable,” I asked him what he meant. He said that at least “there weren’t any crazy miracles you are required to believe in.” I am not sure what one might or might not be required to believe in as a Buddhist, but there is certainly no scarcity where the miraculous is concerned. I provided my friend with a few examples in this regard and he was rather stunned. He never imagined Buddhism included anything magical in it. Buddhism was solely about self-development in his view. It was supposed to be logical and reasonable and sane.



Buddhist Children

I was not looking for family ties when I did my study on women’s ordination in Sri Lanka, and yet the family ties were there, everywhere, staring at me while I remained focused on technical details associated with higher ordination. Since that study, I have spent quite a bit of time wondering what I missed. I assumed the renunciants I was interviewing represented a Buddhist ideal and I was focused on the injustice the tradition was embodying by refusing to support the women who were attempting to embody it. While I remain just as fascinated by the politics of ordination (and continue to support the women who are indeed trying to embody it), I regret having put down my pen as often as I did during those interviews. The women I spoke with had much fuller lives than I was capable of appreciating at the time. More than anything, I regret assuming what their priorities were, rather than asking them to tell me about their priorities themselves.

Of course, a research project needs to be focused; there is nothing wrong with pursuing the subject I was there to study, and it was clear that many of the female renunciants I spoke with were interested in the politics of ordination too, but what I never asked was how those issues ranked in their overall list of concerns? What were the priorities of the individual women I was talking with? Had I asked, would I have discovered that, for some of them at least, family was included in their list, despite their renunciant status? Would I have discovered that their technical ordination status did not mean as much to each of them as it meant to me? I don’t know.

A number of scholars have begun to ask the kinds of questions I failed to raise during that research project a decade ago and we are discovering so much more about Buddhism as a result. The aforementioned monograph by Shayne Clarke is groundbreaking for its meticulous textual investigations that clearly necessitate reimagining Buddhist monastic history. He cites examples

such as husbands and wives taking ordination together and still maintaining contact, monks and nuns staying in touch with and visiting their relatives, and the recurrent reality, as evidenced in the literature, of children of an ordained parent functioning as a common presence in monasteries.

The edited volume *Little Buddhas: Children and Childhoods in Buddhist Texts and Traditions* (Sasson 2013b) is equally revealing. Gregory Schopen's chapter in this volume considers *vinaya* regulations surrounding children and demonstrated that some children were gifted to monasteries as potential monastic servants.¹² Kate Crosby (2013) studies the role of Rāhula (the Buddha's son) and finds evidence to suggest that the Pāli *suttas* associated with Rāhula may have been intended for a young audience. Todd Lewis and Christoph Emmrich (2013) provide the extraordinary example of the Newari *Ihi* ritual in which girls are symbolically married to the "thought of enlightenment" (*bodhicitta*) as a form of Buddhist "activation," while Monica Lindberg Falk (2013) describes Thai nunneries bursting with nurseries to accommodate the older siblings studying in their schools. Elijah Ary (2013) recounts his own experience as a *tulku* and the kinds of expectations he was forced to carry from childhood onward, and almost all of the studies in the book make some reference to food, demonstrating the most mundane truth that anyone who cares for children struggles with what, how, and when to feed them—monastic institutions included (Sasson 2013a: 13).

All of these studies, and many more, demonstrate the variety of roles children play in Buddhist communities. Children are sometimes adopted by nunneries, sometimes raised as masters, sometimes used as monastic servants, sometimes trained for a monastic career, and sometimes have nothing to do with monastic life at all. Children are everywhere in the Buddhist tradition, and what is amazing is that scholars failed to look for them and instructors taught Buddhism as if they were not there. Not so different from our students, we expected Buddhism to be limited to its renunciant adults. We looked right past the children playing in the monastery courtyard as a result.



Rethinking Assumptions

The assumptions we greet Buddhism with has everything to do with who we are and very little to do with Buddhism itself. It has to do with our Protestant presuppositions, our strong belief in individualism, and our textual prioritization. It also has to do with contemporary disillusionment with Judeo-Christian religions, with the Dalai Lama's popularity, with advertising campaigns and

selective news coverage (images of Burmese monks peacefully refusing *dāna* from their government, but not the pro-war or anti-minority nationalistic rhetoric emerging out of some monasteries).

From one perspective, we might say that the hope we paint Buddhism with is evidence of the human spirit's unshakeable optimism, for no matter how often we get our hearts broken, we still believe that somewhere out there, human beings can be different. It is classic utopianism—the conviction that some place in the world, some community, some religion, will not betray itself. For many of my students, the hope is that Buddhism will be just that.

But Buddhism cannot play that role. Not realistically anyway. I understand my students and their wish that Buddhism be different. I had similar hopes when I first encountered it twenty years ago as well. I shared their idealistic zeal and looked upward with eyes brimming with optimism, but two decades of exposure and study in the field has changed that.

Great hopes and great disillusionments are some of the necessary ingredients for growing up. Buddhists are people, not disembodied ideals. They have children and they perform rituals; not all Buddhist adults are philosophers. Sometimes Buddhism inspires and sometimes it does not, and sometimes it is just another collection of ideas attempting to make sense of the world.



Conclusion

I have come to the conclusion over the past few years that my role when teaching Buddhism is to help students see their own assumptions (as I continue to work through my own), and to try to make the Buddhist world human in the process. In one of my favorite articles, Jonathan Z. Smith argues passionately for the Enlightenment motto that “nothing human is foreign to me,” and thus that everything produced by human beings must be intelligible. He argues that, as scholars in the humanities, our profession requires that we make everything that might seem foreign into something that is familiar, for we are in the business of translation from one cultural context to the next. For many of my students, Buddhism is “foreign.” It is somehow beyond their reach, unintelligible, and thus something they can idealize (and thus risk eventually demonizing as well¹³). It seems to me that my role is to help students see the human in the Buddhist tradition, to relate to it as human beings and not to keep themselves separate from it with utopian narratives. As Smith articulates, “If we do not persist in the quest for intelligibility, there can be no human sciences, let alone, any place for the study of religion within them” (1982: 120).

When I teach about Buddhism, my role must be to bring the human and the familiar into the classroom and chase unrealistic expectations away.

Notes

1. For an excellent discussion on this, see Salgado 2013. The results of my own research from that project were published in Sasson 2010.
2. I have not collected data on any of this. The above description is limited by the fact of its being anecdotal, but one semester after another, I seem to find myself standing before a classroom full of students who seem particularly generous where Buddhism is concerned.
3. I am borrowing the expression from Stephen Prothero (2008).
4. This is particularly the case in the province of Quebec, where I live and teach. Here, religion has been almost entirely removed from high school curricula, thereby creating a shockingly religiously illiterate generation (and community).
5. Some collections on the website are listed as libraries but function as archives or special collections.
6. <http://www.mcgill.ca/library/about/collections>.
7. One of my PhD advisors, Prof. Barry Levy, had a coffee mug in his office that had a wonderful line printed on it: “so many books, so little time.” I think about that mug often.
8. Worthy of mention here is Gregory Schopen’s (1991) important contribution.
9. There remains an ongoing debate about whether the title should be translated as “rhinoceros” or “rhinoceros horn.” The main argument is that ascetics should wander alone, either like a rhinoceros or like its horn (Indian rhinos only have one horn). The argument can be taken in either direction, but it seems more natural to the text that it should be read as “rhinoceros” rather than its horn. Horns don’t tend to roam . . .
10. Translation from Norman 2001.
11. Gross 1996: 84. She repeats this view almost verbatim in Gross 1998: 127.
12. Schopen 2013. See also Langenberg 2013a, 2013b.
13. This was precisely Donald Lopez’s (1999) argument in *Prisoners of Shangri-La*.

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Teaching Engaged Buddhism in Uncertain Times

Christopher Queen

Introduction

Forty-five years ago I took my first course in Buddhism with one of Oberlin College's newest professors. Donald Swearer was a breath of fresh air amid the darkening clouds of the 1960s. Besides teaching, he was finishing up his doctoral dissertation, preaching in local Ohio churches to help pay the bills, and keeping his office door open for students who wanted to talk. Swearer's research interest was the *Visuddhimagga*, a dense compendium of Theravāda philosophy and meditation techniques, but he seemed to embody our enthusiasm for a religion that stood out from the rest. Buddhism fit the counter-cultural *zeitgeist* with its uncanny ability to address the central tasks of late adolescence: self-discovery, life-mastery, and social transformation.

As religion majors at a college famous for firsts—admitting women and blacks in the 1830s, and linking a liberal arts college, a school of theology, and a conservatory of music on one campus—many of us benefited from the rise of academic religious studies. Our department chair, Clyde Holbrook, published the first sustained defense of a discipline linking historical, literary, cultural, and philosophical studies, *Religion, a Humanistic Field* (1963), and by the end of the decade Oberlin boasted one of the largest religion departments in the United States. Holbrook taught “Modern Religious Thought,” a popular course for majors and non-majors, while Edward Leroy Long attracted student activists to the study of comparative social ethics. Thomas Frank used archaeology to chart the clash between biblical prophecy and political corruption, and William McNaughton identified the social dimensions of Taoist poetry and

the Confucian *Analects*. One year, students kept a military recruiter confined to his car until he departed the campus without an appointment. Reading the early Buddhist scriptures, I discovered the Buddha's surprising refusal to admit draft resisters to the ancient monastic order. Was the Eightfold Path compatible with the anti-war and civil rights movements? Were politics and religion estranged?

In 1967 Professor Swearer took a leave of absence to study with Ven. Nyanaponika Thera, a renowned meditation master in Sri Lanka. When he returned, he designed and co-taught a course on Buddhist meditation during Oberlin's January term. With a Thai monk to lead two weeks of *satipaṭṭhāna* or mindfulness meditation, and a Japanese priest to lead the final two weeks of *zazen*, students spent their mornings in formal meditation and their afternoons in reading and discussion, guided by the three teachers. In *Secrets of the Lotus* (1971), Swearer reflected on the success of this experiment in experiential pedagogy. All twenty-eight students (selected from a pool of sixty-five applicants) had survived the agony of sore backs and knees, and all submitted journals reflecting on their month in a transposed temporary monastery. Swearer wrote in the preface:

Some claim that Buddhism now offers the most viable spiritual option of all the great world religions. This option is not one characterized primarily by a set of rituals or elaborate dogma but by a unique world view and a distinctive way or path. Buddhism offers, on the one hand, a radical critique of the human situation; on the other, it optimistically affirms that a man can find a solution to the human problem by his own efforts. It promises no easy panaceas, however. The way is well charted but it demands effort and self-discipline. Central to this way is the practice of meditation.

Swearer 1971: ix

A verdict, of sorts, was implied. Just as the counterculture dividing America had two wings—the radicals and the hippies—so Buddhism was an alternative to the political strife that wracked the late 1960s and early 1970s, a realm of inner peace available to those who meditate.



Meeting the Engaged Buddhists

Twenty years later, following years of draft resistance in a divinity school and appointments as a boarding school religion teacher, director of a

residential school for disabled children, and assistant dean of students at Boston University, I found myself in a position not unlike that of my former mentor, Donald Swearer. As an adjunct professor of religion at BU, with the PhD finally under my belt, I jumped at the chance to go to South Asia for a first-hand encounter with Buddhism. Initially planned as a pilgrimage to some of the ancient sites of Buddhist India—Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Sanchi, Ajanta—the trip turned into something very different. A week before my departure, I noticed a poster on the department bulletin board announcing a talk on “The Buddhist Revival in India” by members of the lay English organization, Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. Intrigued, I found the Cambridge Zen Center where the event was held, and proceeded to have a life-changing experience. The talk was a slide show on the social-political-religious liberation movement among India’s untouchables that had grown exponentially since a mass Buddhist conversion ceremony in the central Indian city of Nagpur in 1956.

The images of Buddhist devotion coupled with social work among the poor *Dalit* (“broken,” i.e., untouchable) communities in Maharashtra state, carried out with financial support of the British Buddhists, were deeply moving. Even more compelling was the story of the leader of the movement, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956), a Dalit activist, barrister, and scholar. As the last of fourteen children in a poor military family, Ambedkar was the first untouchable to attend college and graduate school, earning doctorates at Columbia University and the London School of Economics, passing the bar, and launching a nonviolent civil rights movement for low-caste people in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1947, after years of campaigning amid hostile British and Brahmin factions—including Gandhi and the Congress Party—Ambedkar was appointed Law Minister and principle draftsman of the constitution in the new government. Yet even at the end of his career, as he suffered from worsening diabetes and heart disease, high-caste doctors would not treat him in his home: he was still “untouchable” to them. Having announced in 1935 that he would not die a Hindu, but seek a religion free of caste distinctions, Ambedkar formally embraced Buddhism six weeks before this death.

The Zen Center slide talk was a fundraiser for the engaged Buddhists of India. The presenters were happy to accept a donation and to refer me to Eleanor Zelliott, a historian at Carleton College who had studied and supported the Ambedkar movement for decades. In addition to the bibliography springing from her dissertation on “Dr. Ambedkar and the Mahar Movement” (University of Pennsylvania, 1969), Professor Zelliott provided me with names and phone numbers of leaders and friends in Mumbai, Pune, Aurangabad,

and Nagpur, the hotbeds of the movement. My travel focus shifted immediately from the dead monuments of ancient India to the living Buddhists of today. I learned from my new friends why their leader had called his Buddhism of social reform *Nava-yāna*, a “new vehicle” for spiritual practice.¹

By the time I returned to Boston University, laden like the seventh-century Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang with manuscripts, books, and images from a bustling Buddhist India, I discovered that students, faculty, and community members were eager to hear the tales and see the faces of religious resurgence and revival. And as the recent survivor of postgraduate intellectualism and author of a dense dissertation on “Systems Theory in Religious Studies: A Methodological Critique,” I was ready to be the apostle for socially engaged Buddhism that Donald Swearer had been for Buddhist meditation on his return from Sri Lanka in 1968. I had discovered that religion and politics were not strange bedfellows, even in Buddhist Asia.

In 1990 I was appointed Dean of Students for Continuing Education and Lecturer on the Study of Religion at Harvard. Opportunities to investigate and to teach the history and ideology of the Ambedkar movement and, more broadly, of socially and politically engaged Buddhism, now expanded considerably. The Harvard library system is the second largest in the world, after the Library of Congress, and contains rich collections on the history and philosophy of religions, Sanskrit and Indian studies, and, I discovered, even the Ambedkar movement itself. Soon I was invited to present fieldwork and research findings before the Harvard Buddhist Studies Forum, an endowed lecture series for new research in the field.

The talk, “Dr. Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation,” was well received and became the anchor for a panel on Engaged Buddhism at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion. I invited Professor Zelliot to speak on Buddhist women in the Ambedkar movement, Sallie B. King then of James Madison University on Thich Nhat Hanh and the Vietnamese anti-war movement, and José Cabezón, then of Iliff School of Theology, on the Dalai Lama’s Buddhist principles in the Tibetan liberation movement. Some of these conference papers, in turn, formed the core of an anthology, *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (1996), which I edited with Professor King. Finally, Diana Eck, chair of the Harvard Committee on the Study of Religion, invited me to create a course on “Buddhism and Social Change,” to be offered to undergraduates in the College and graduate students in Arts and Sciences and the Divinity School. Challenged by the idea, I began to assemble the elements of a course that was not offered elsewhere, to my knowledge. The first order of business was to consider the outlook of today’s university students.

Building the Engaged Buddhism Course

Much had changed since Professor Swearer dared to bring Buddhist meditation into the classroom in the late 1960s. Now on the cusp of the twenty-first century, Harvard students were well acquainted with the connection between Buddhism and meditation. Many were veterans of meditation, yoga, and the martial-arts training at the local Y's and community centers back home. On the other hand, any casual use of new-age or left-coast lingo like *karma*, *nirvāṇa*, and *samsāra* was more likely to induce eye-rolling than the thought that a Buddhist was near. The postmodern *hermeneutics of suspicion*, while waning after a two-decade run, was still around: every text had a subtext rooted in power and privilege, and *meta-narratives*, claims to transcendent truth or efficacy, must be exposed for their hegemonic pretensions. Yet political activism among college students was at a low ebb in 1992. The 1980s had ended in economic recession and the collapse of the Cold War. The prosperity and exuberance of the 1990s was yet to come.

Unconcerned with spirituality or politics, Harvard College students focused instead on the art of course selection. During shopping week, they dropped into the first lecture and quietly applied secret algorithms to the syllabus and instructor to determine how a course grade of A or B might be extracted as painlessly as possible. Graduate school and divinity students were more interested in acquiring skills and perspectives that would support their research or professional objectives. Continuing education students—the engaged Buddhism course was also adapted for the Harvard Extension School—were more likely to acknowledge personal reasons for choosing courses in the study of religion, along with intellectual, academic, and professional ones.

Faced with the option of limiting the enrollment of Buddhism and Social Change to students with strong backgrounds in Buddhist studies, I chose instead to welcome all comers. I felt that the essential narrative of the course—the dependent co-origination of a religious tradition in a succession of cultural settings—could be understood by almost anyone. And I hoped that students from other disciplinary concentrations would bring insights to bear on such koans of the course as, “Is engaged Buddhism really Buddhist?” As Thich Nhat Hanh likes to say, “Buddhism is made entirely of non-Buddhist elements,” an illustration of the concept of “emptiness.” I hoped that the family resemblances of the many Buddhisms might be better recognized by visitors from outside the family, students from other departments. With no prerequisites, course enrollments in the first few years exceeded fifteen students, the maximum size for a seminar. Classes were held twice a week in a small lecture

hall with traditional seating. Discussion was encouraged but tended to involve the “talkers” in the group, allowing most others to practice the noble silence.

Fortunately, this situation changed as the initial novelty of the course wore off and registration settled down to ten to fifteen students. Now the course was listed as a seminar, limited to fifteen students, and scheduled once a week. While the reduction of lecture time was dramatic, from three hours to two hours per week, there were advantages to the change. Prospective students were asked to fill out a questionnaire detailing previous Buddhist studies, languages, international experience, and their keenness to take the course. Unexpectedly, the exercise of filling out the survey introduced a theme of the course: that the identity, background, and motivation of the student-researcher will influence the angle and quality of his or her research. This principle was reinforced in weekly writing assignments. These two- to three-page response papers, reflecting some problem or perspective in the week’s reading, were judged—annotated with reader comments, but not graded—on the basis of the writer’s ability to enter into informed, critical dialogue with the course material. Meanwhile, the weekly essays had the benefit of giving each student a kind of script for the seminar discussion. There is no hiding around a seminar table, and each student was expected to participate. Informing students that scholars are not in agreement on the shape and direction of Buddhism today, I encouraged them to think of their coursework as part of a larger enterprise, the investigation of hypotheses related to the evolution of Buddhism in society. New insights in the field might evolve from their own writing and discussion.

More important than the style of a course is its content. Wanting to create a point of entry to Buddhist studies that stressed its social teachings, I described the course as a corrective:

The Buddhist tradition is commonly associated with the cultivation of mental discipline, moral purification, and philosophical analysis. Its social and political dimensions are often neglected or regarded as the inadvertent byproducts of the inward path. This course addresses the relationship between the personal and social manifestations of Buddhist thought and practice, and surveys the roles Buddhist thinkers and institutions have played in contexts of rapid social change, cultural transformation, and globalization in the modern world.

As a survey of Buddhist social teachings, the seminar examines the evolution of central concepts (impermanence, selflessness, suffering, interdependence), ethical styles (discipline, virtue, altruism,

engagement), and themes (peace, justice, gender, ecology) in Asia and the West. Representative figures and movements in the rise of socially engaged Buddhism since the 19th Century will be considered. No previous study of Buddhism is required.²

The structural elements necessary to carry out such a project were to be found in the reading list, themes for writing and discussion, and experiential elements: audiovisual materials, guest speakers, and field trips.

The Reading List. The readings for Buddhism and Social Change have consistently begun with an introduction to Buddhist ethics (Saddhatissa 1987 or Harvey 2000), and included *The Edicts of Asoka* (Nikam and McKeon, 1959), A. F. Wright's *Buddhism in China* (1959), and Cabezón's *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender* (1992). While this may seem an odd list, an evolving host of additional titles have more than filled out the vision offered in the course description. Donald Swearer's *Buddhism and Society in Southeast Asia* (1981) and the anthology *Ethics, Wealth, and Salvation* (with R. Sizemore, 1990) went from required reading to lecture notes when the books went out of print. Fred Eppsteiner's *The Path of Compassion* (1988) and Kenneth Kraft's *Inner Peace, World Peace* (1992) served well as early anthologies of some of the great engaged Buddhist voices, followed by the Queen and King (1996) volume and its sequels, *Engaged Buddhism in the West* (Queen 2000) and *Action Dharma: New Studies in Engaged Buddhism* (Queen, Prebish, and Keown 2003), which offered extended critical analysis.³

Thematic classics like Diana Paul's *Women in Buddhism* (1985), Sangharakshita's *Ambedkar and Buddhism* (1986), Brian Victoria's *Zen at War* (1997), and John Avedon's *Tibet Today* (1998) were succeeded by newer studies on rising global movements, such as Richard Seager's *Encountering the Dharma* (2006), on Soka Gakkai International, and Richard Madsen's *Democracy's Dharma* (2007), on the engaged or "humanistic" Buddhist sects of Taiwan: Ciji Gongdehui, Foguangshan, and Fagushan. Books such as Donald L. Lopez's *A Modern Buddhist Bible* (2002) and David L. McMahan's *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (2008) offer surveys of the sweeping changes that have marked Buddhist spirituality and activism over the past two hundred years.

While these and a flood of other titles document the rise of socially engaged Buddhism by the turn of the twenty-first century, it is curious to note the existence of engaged-Buddhism-deniers as well. The first syllabus for "Buddhism and Social Change" (1992) lists Richard Robinson and Willard Johnson's widely used textbook, *The Buddhist Religion: A Historical Introduction* (3d ed., 1982), although the book makes no reference to engaged Buddhism. Coming out

before Harvey's comprehensive introduction to Buddhist ethics, the Robinson and Johnson text was included for beginners as a general history of the tradition. In the 1980s the authors could be forgiven their silence on engaged Buddhism, as it preceded many landmarks of the coming years: Nobel Peace Prizes for the Dalai Lama and Aung San Suu Kyi; Niwano Peace Prizes for A. T. Ariyaratne, Maha Ghosananda, and Sulak Sivaraksa; and the dramatic uprisings of Tibetan and Burmese monks during crackdowns by their respective overlords. Yet why silence on the uprising of Vietnamese monks in the 1960s to protest the war in their country? Where is Thich Nhat Hanh, the charismatic monk and peace activist who coined the expression "engaged Buddhism"? The Dalai Lama is mentioned as the leader of the Tibetan people in exile, and Ambedkar is associated, "curiously enough," with the conversion of more than a half-million Untouchables to Buddhism.⁴ Yet neither is seen as a Buddhist leader whose practice included the struggle for social change.

In the fourth edition of *The Buddhist Religion*, published in 1997, engaged Buddhism is accorded two sentences. Described as an example of "extrapolated Buddhism," in which "themes are taken out of their original framework and extrapolated to radically different contexts," engaged Buddhism is said to misinterpret the teaching of interdependence "as a call to an activist approach to social and environmental reform. Because of the spread of Western values through modern education, this movement has found fervent supporters not only in the West, but also among activist groups in Asia" (Robinson and Johnson 1997: 301f.). In the fifth and latest edition, smartly renamed *Buddhist Religions* and appearing in 2005, the treatment of engaged Buddhism still remains nearly invisible, with the following two sentences expanding the coverage to four, under the rubric "Calls for Reform."

A more distinctly Western reform is the development of "engaged Buddhism," which calls on Buddhist practitioners to prove the worth of their practice in this-worldly terms by engaging in social and environmental reform. Although many of the pioneers of engaged Buddhism, such as Thich Nhat Hanh and Sulak Sivaraksa, are Asian, their inspiration seems to have come from the Christian social activists of the nineteenth century.⁵

The final two sentences reiterate those of the fourth edition, asserting that engaged Buddhists have conflated the traditional dependent co-arising with the Romantic ideal of interdependence in order to justify social action. The author of these sentences and other revisions of the textbook is an American Theravāda monk, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, who, as Geoffrey DeGraff, was a

student of Professor Swearer at Oberlin College in the 1960s. He dedicates his portions of the text to Swearer, “My first *ācārya* in things Buddhist.”

Themes for Writing and Discussion. The narrative structure of the course is a blend of historical and thematic elements. By starting at the beginning, with readings and lectures on the social origins and ethical teachings of the Buddha, proceeding through the Asokan and Chinese transformations of the teachings, charting the Dharma’s interaction with Western modernity, and ending with the emergence of globalized and engaged expressions of the tradition, students were encouraged to adopt a developmental approach to the material. While the course cannot claim to be a history of Buddhist social teachings, the effect of the historical-thematic approach is to underscore dramatic shifts in religious thought and practice that co-arise with changes in social, cultural, and political settings. As in the one-term World Religions survey, which I have also taught since the 1980s, the bird’s-eye view of religious traditions in flux and interaction over millennia and across vast cultural spaces is powerfully heuristic—one sees connections and distinctions that do not appear in more exhaustive, single-tradition or text-based courses.

Along the lines of Max Müller’s “he who knows only one, understands none,” I argue that to compare the Four *Yānas* (*Hīnayāna*, *Mahāyāna*, *Vajrayāna*, *Navayāna*) using the rubrics of the Three Jewels (*Buddha*, the ideal person/leader; *Dharma*, the teachings; *Sangha*, institutions and rituals), yields a historical/functional grid of twelve fields in which students may locate the myriad Buddhisms that appear in the literature. Another pattern of Buddhist soteriology and institutionalization over time are the four “styles” of Buddhist ethics—discipline, virtue, altruism, and engagement—that I identified in *Engaged Buddhism in the West* (Queen 2000: 11–17).

Mapped onto the historical progression of the course are a collection of themes that are loosely related to events on the ground. These provide topics for lecture and discussion as well as a sequence of focused essays. During years when class enrollment exceeded the seminar ideal, I substituted four essays for the weekly response papers. These papers followed the themes developed in the reading and lectures:

Self and Society (three pages, ungraded). Write an account of your religious background or outlook (part 1) and then comment on its compatibility (or lack of compatibility) with elements of the Buddhist worldview set forth in Peter Harvey’s *Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, pp. 1–122 (part 2). The best writers on religion have identified and examined their own beliefs and values before attempting to understand those of others.

Religion and the State (four pages, drafted, then graded). Write a succinct profile of the early Buddhist model of the ideal society (part 1), and then offer your own critique of this model: Is it as viable today as it was at the time of King Asoka? Why or why not? (part 2)

Gender and Spirituality (five pages, drafted, then graded). Choose a specific topic on Buddhism, sexuality, and gender, presenting the Buddhist teachings and social implications (part 1). Then reflect on their viability in today's society (part 2). As always, carefully document all references to your reading and illustrate your arguments with concrete examples or references.

Whither Buddhism? (8 pages, graded) addresses the problems of identity, continuity and transformation. Based on course readings and discussion, apply the principles of socially engaged Buddhism to a specific problem in today's world: war and diplomacy, environmental justice, race relations, etc. Assess its efficacy as an approach to the problem and its faithfulness to the founding principles of Buddhism. Will Buddhist social engagement increase or decline in the future?

Over the years, other essay topics have been used with success: economic and social justice; violence, war, and peace; environmental ethics; and ethics and emptiness, a critique of the Mahāyāna claim that compassion arises from wisdom, the deep experience of interdependence, or "emptiness."

The focus on themes and analytic rubrics like *Yānas*, *Jewels*, and *Styles of Ethics* helps students to control a huge database from an early stage in the course. The first paper is ungraded out of regard for the personal information that may be shared, and because it serves as a writing sample which may trigger a recommendation to seek help at the expository writing center. The second and third papers benefit from drafting and refinement under the instructor's guidance, and the last paper is a miniature term paper with no preliminary draft. The "W" element in the course is guided and supported by the university's commitment to teach "writing across the disciplines."

Audiovisuals, Guests, and Field Trips. Film and slideshow images take the class to street corners, temples, large public rituals, and boardrooms—where the action is. There is no substitute for the states of wonder induced by *Buddhism: Footprint of the Buddha—India*, a 1977 BBC documentary on Theravāda Buddhism shot in Sri Lanka. Amid the sounds and sights of a Buddhist land, students witness the ordination of a small village boy and the walking meditations of a community of forest monks deep in the jungle.⁶ Viewing the documentary *In the Spirit of Free Inquiry: The Dalai Lama in*

Conversation with Western Buddhist Teachers, students are deeply moved to see the Dalai Lama speechless and tearful after hearing of the suffering of Tibetan Buddhist nuns in the West, the result of patriarchy and misogyny within the sanghas.⁷

Becoming the Buddha in L.A., produced by Diana Eck and WGBH TV in 1993, documents the welter of Buddhist communities in a modern city, with commentary by Eck, Thich Nhat Hanh, Gary Snyder, Masao Kodani, Jakusho Kwong, Pema Chödrön, and Joseph Goldstein. Again, students witness an ordination, this time of a Thai teenager shaving his head and eyebrows for the summer between high school and college. His teacher is a white, American monk who speaks fluent Thai and chants in Pali. We visit the massive Hsi Lai Temple on Buddha's Birthday, Taiko drumming and a family Dharmathon quiz game at a Japanese American Buddhist "Church," and finally a Vietnamese house-church that is helping a young woman understand Buddha's teaching of impermanence upon the sudden death of her husband.⁸ Seeing slides of my fieldwork in the engaged Buddhist communities of Asia and the West brings in the human element in ways that narrative and intellectual analysis cannot.

Guest speakers bring personal testimony and broad perspectives into the classroom, and allow students to talk back and question assumptions. Guests from the many Buddhist sanghas and service and activist organizations in the Boston area appreciate audiences who share their twin passions for Buddhism and social change. I encourage students to take chances when ideas or questions cross their minds, and I warn guests in advance that anything goes in a Harvard classroom. Particularly successful have been visitors from the Ikeda Center for Peace, Learning, and Dialogue, our campus neighbors two blocks away. Founded by Soka Gakkai president Daisaku Ikeda and active in race relations, environmental protection, and peace missions to the United Nations, the center is run by lay Nichiren practitioners who are willing to share their own conversion stories and report on their community service. Other popular visitors are two American Buddhist nuns, Ji Hyang Padma, the Wellesley College Buddhist chaplain who was trained in the Korean Zen tradition, and Sister Clare Carter, a leader of the Nipponzan Myohoji Buddhist Order at the New England Peace Pagoda in Leverett, Massachusetts. Ven. Ji Hyang and Sister Clare speak powerfully of their lives of total commitment to the Dharma and of their struggles for social change through teaching, counseling, chanting, peace walks, and public speaking.

Field trips and field work have also enlivened Buddhism and Social Change over the years. During the 1990s, Professor Eck founded the Pluralism Project for the purpose of mapping Asian and Middle Eastern religious institutions—temples, ashrams, Islamic centers, Sikh *gurdwaras*,

meditation centers—across the United States.⁹ An early publication was the booklet, “World Religions in Boston,” which profiled Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh groups in the metropolitan area. One year, our class divided up the Buddhist groups for the purpose of additional research, conducting interviews and administering opinion surveys among leaders and members. Each student or team produced a term paper of their findings, and the overall results were tabulated by an alumnus of the course with work-study funding the following term. The results became part of an ongoing database for future students in the course.

Getting off campus as a class requires logistical planning, particularly finding students who have cars (or can drive a rented van) and are willing to devote a Saturday or Sunday to visit the exotic religious frontiers of Western Massachusetts.¹⁰ A typical itinerary included the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, whose associate director, Sumi Loundon, was an alumna of the Harvard Divinity School and spouse of Hwansoo Ilmee Kim, a Korean monk and Harvard doctoral candidate whom she first met in the class years before. After hearing Sumi and Ilmee’s own Dharma stories and learning about the mission and business of a rural Buddhist study-practice center, the class made its way to two towns farther West to visit the New England Peace Pagoda and the Zen Peacemakers, where Roshi Bernie Glassman met students for a group interview. In the cavernous former cow barn that served as the Zendo and conference center of the Peacemakers, Bernie’s thoughts on engaged Buddhism—in his signature blue jean coveralls and a red bandana—was a high point of the trip.¹¹



Conclusions

Students attending Buddhism and Social Change in November 2011 had to show photo identification to the campus police officers who guarded the two gates to Harvard Yard that were not chained. The “Occupy” movement that had sprung up in city parks and college campuses throughout the country hit ours this week. Colorful tents and placards declaring “We are the 99 percent” and “Occupy Harvard” dotted the lawns trod by religion students since 1636, when Harvard began as a seminary. As class got underway, there was little sign of the drama outside—Extension School students are not kids, but typically working adults pursuing degrees in the evening or a lifelong passion for learning. Yet this round of global protests was not primarily about campuses or youth. In the Middle East, the “Arab Spring” of massive demonstrations in

the central squares of Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and Syria led to brutality, regime change, and hopes for democratic reform. As the spring became the summer and then the fall, a widening crisis in world financial markets engulfed European countries in violent protests, summit meetings, and more regime change.

Back in Sever Hall, class discussion of the weekly topic “Buddhism, Violence, War, and Peacemaking,” moved seamlessly from the Dalai Lama’s “five principles of Buddhist liberation,” formulated years ago by José Cabezon, to the events going on outside. What is the relevance of Buddhist conceptions of interdependence, equality, nonviolence, universal responsibility, and truth to the struggle for self-determination and economic justice in a world of high-rise banks and drone missile attacks? One student stayed after class to discuss the topic for his final paper on “Whither Buddhism?” As a veteran of two tours of duty as a Blackhawk helicopter pilot over Afghanistan, he wanted to know whether the Buddha would have regarded his military career as “right livelihood.”

The class viewed slides of the Dalit Buddhist movement in India, depicting families posing in their homes before images of Babasaheb Ambedkar, the “bodhisattva” who led them out of poverty and into education, careers of their own choosing, and optimism for the future. Students saw Professors Bhao Lokhande and V. N. Dhoke of Nagpur University, both Ambedkar Buddhists, but 180 degrees apart on the question of meditation. Lokhande, professor of Buddhism and Pali literature and a repeat attendee of the grueling ten-day *vapassanā* course at S. N. Goenka’s retreat center near Mumbai, is a true believer. We Buddhists should meditate, he stressed—“What do you think the Buddha is doing in all those statues?”—and meditation will improve our critical intelligence and the ability to stand up to the Brahmins who run the university and the country. But Dr. Dhoke, the physicist, adamantly disagreed: “Meditation only makes you more passive and accepting of whatever comes. The Buddha spent his time walking among the poor, not sitting under a tree. The struggle requires energy and cunning.” It is clear that the conventional wisdom, Buddhism = meditation, can no longer be taken for granted. Our Peace Pagoda and Ikeda Center friends chant their homage to the True Law inscribed in the Lotus Sutra, *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo*. Like Dhoke and most of the Ambedkar Buddhists, they do not meditate, but they subscribe to the other features of Swearer’s Buddhism: a radical critique of the human situation and a solution based on effort and self-discipline.

Teaching engaged Buddhism is probably best done in uncertain times. The Buddha taught that all beings suffer and that relief is available to all, however long it takes. These premises do not make much sense when students and

professors live in bubbles of privilege and certainty. But these bubbles are bursting all over. Now we teach that there are many Buddhisms, and that none of them is the true Dharma. When considering the ways in which Buddhists have responded to uncertain times over the centuries, by weeding the garden of belief and practice and planting new seeds—Ambedkar borrowed this metaphor from John Dewey, his professor at Columbia University—we smile at Thomas Tweed’s warning,

If we ignore those who affiliate with hybrid traditions, engage in creole practices, or express ambivalent identities, there would be no one left to study. Scholars cannot locate a pristine beginning or pre-contact essence to use as a norm to define orthodoxy or orthopraxis. There is hybridity all the way down (Prebish and Bowman 2002: 19).

So perhaps the Ven. Thanissaro is right after all. Our ideas of Buddhist interdependence today, whether expressed by the Dalai Lama, by the Vietnamese Zen master who composed “Please Call Me by my True Names” and coined the term “engaged Buddhism,” or the student who wanted to see his military service as right livelihood may have been influenced by European Romanticism, not to mention modern biology, climate science, information technology, and globalization. And these ideas may in turn motivate modern Buddhists to “get off their cushions” to practice social service and political activism. They illustrate the emptiness that Nhat Hanh sees when he “looks deeply” at life, and the hybridity that Tweed sees “all the way down” in the history of religions. And they offer students of Buddhism and Social Change a chance to see the Dharma in challengingly new ways.

Notes

1. Eleanor Zelliot’s research over twenty years is collected in *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (1992). Later collections of analysis of the movement include Narain and Ahir 1994 and Jondhale and Beltz 2004.
2. Buddhism and Social Change syllabus. See <http://www.extension.harvard.edu/> for Buddhism and Social Change and other courses on religion at the Harvard Extension School.
3. During the twenty years that the course has been offered, I co-edited four anthologies on Buddhism and social change: Queen and King 1996; Williams and Queen 1999; Queen 2000; and Queen, Prebish, and Keown 2003.
4. “Though identified with political strategy and the attainment of equal rights by Untouchables, this conversion means that some Indians have become Buddhist again” (Robinson and Johnson 1982: 105).

5. Robinson, Johnson, and Bhikkhu 2005: 304. Professor Swearer is not an “engaged-Buddhism-denier,” having contributed a chapter on Sulak Sivaraksa to *Engaged Buddhism* (1996) and many other citations on the rise of Buddhist social action and service in Asia and the West.
6. *Buddhism: Footprint of the Buddha – India* DVD, 52 minutes (London: BBC Long Search series, 1977), available from Ambrose Video Publishing, Inc., 145 West 45 St., Suite 1115, New York, NY 10036, 800-526-4663.
7. *In the Spirit of Free Inquiry: The Dalai Lama in Conversation with Western Buddhist Teachers*, VHS 107 minutes (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993), available from Parallax Press, P.O. Box 7355, Berkeley, CA 94707, <http://www.parallax.org/>.
8. *Becoming the Buddha in L.A.* DVD, 57 minutes (Boston: WGBH, 1993), available from WGBH Boston Video, P.O. Box 2284, South Burlington, VT 05407-2284, 800-949-8670.
9. The Pluralism Project’s mission statement reads, in part, “World Religions in America is a decade-long research project, with current funding from the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, to engage students in studying the new religious diversity in the United States. We will explore particularly the communities and religious traditions of Asia and the Middle East that have become woven into the religious fabric of the United States in the past twenty-five years.” See <http://pluralism.org/>.
10. Harvard’s Committee on the Study of Religion subsidized transportation and food expenses for the field trips on more than one occasion. The Western Massachusetts trip routinely ended at my family’s weekend cottage for hearty soup, homemade bread, salad, and pumpkin and apple pies around the roaring fireplace.
11. I served as president of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies for many years, and was able to supplement the information that Sumi provided. Updates, as of 2011: Dr. H. I. Kim is professor of Korean Buddhist Studies at Duke University. Sumi Loundon Kim is the editor of two books on youthful practitioners, *Blue Jean Buddha* (2001), and *The Buddha’s Apprentices* (2005), and dharma teacher/founder of Buddhist Families of Durham, North Carolina. Bernie Glassman leads the Zen Peacemakers and speaks internationally on socially engaged Buddhism.

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PART V

*Buddhism in New
Academic Fields*

History of Buddhist–Christian Dialogue

Paul O. Ingram

Introduction

The first mention of the Buddha in Christian sources dates from around the year 200 c.e. in the *Miscellany (Stromateis)* of Clement of Alexandria, in which he argued that Christian *gnosis* (“knowledge”) is superior to every other kind of knowledge. In reference to Gautama the Buddha, Clement wrote, “And there are in India those who follow the commandments of the Buddha, whom they revere as God because of his immense holiness” (I, 15, cited in Küng 1986: 307). One hears little else about Buddhism from this period, and we are also little informed about details of the contact between Christian tradition and Buddhism in the Middle Ages. It was not until Jesuit missions led by Francis Xavier and Matteo Ricci to Japan and China in the late sixteenth century that Christians began to receive information about Buddhist traditions and practices. As knowledge of Buddhism gradually made its way into the West, Christian encounter with Buddhism was more monological than dialogical for cultural and historical reasons peculiar to both traditions. Serious Western attempts to understand Buddhism in its own terms did not begin until the emergence of scholarly research in the field of history of religions (*Religionswissenschaft*) in the mid-nineteenth century, which provided the contemporary foundation for Christian dialogical encounter with the world religions in general, and dialogue with Buddhism in particular.

Until recently, the agenda of most Christian theological reflection focused on demonstrating the exclusive superiority of Christian faith and practice as the sole vehicle of humanity’s salvation. However, since the first “East–West

Religions in Encounter” conference, organized by David Chappell in the summer of 1980 at the University of Hawaii, the structure of Christian encounter with Buddhism slowly changed from theological monologue to theological dialogue, at least in liberal circles of contemporary Catholic and Protestant thought. In the fall of 1987 at the annual national meeting of the American Academy of Religion, the initial “East–West Religions in Encounter” group was permanently organized into the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies (SBCS). This society and its journal, *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, has evolved into an important international forum for the continuing dialogue now occurring between Christians and Buddhists, particularly in North America, Europe, South Asia, Korea, Japan, and China, as well as Tibetan Buddhist exiles living in India, North America, and Europe.

Three interdependent forms of Buddhist–Christian dialogue have emerged to this date: conceptual dialogue, socially engaged dialogue, and interior dialogue. The focus of conceptual dialogue is doctrinal, theological, and philosophical because it is concerned primarily with a religious community’s collective self-understanding and worldview. In conceptual dialogue, Buddhists and Christians compare and contrast theological and philosophical formulations on such questions as ultimate reality, human nature, suffering and evil, the role of the historical Jesus in Christian faith and practice, the role of the Buddha in Buddhist faith and practice, what Buddhists and Christians might appropriate from one another, and how to do this in practice. Recently, I have argued that the natural sciences should be included in conceptual Buddhist–Christian dialogue as a “third partner” in the creation of a Buddhist–Christian “trilogue” (see Ingram 2008, 2009: ch. 4).

“Socially engaged dialogue” was first used as a description of Buddhist traditions of social activism by Sallie B. King in her analysis of Thich Nhat Hanh’s notion that “inner work,” or meditation, must engender nonviolent “outer work,” or “social engagement” with the systemic structures of injustice (King 1996a, b). Buddhist–Christian conceptual dialogue has generated deep interest in the relevance of dialogue for issues of social, environmental, economic, and gender justice. Because these issues are systemic, global, interconnected, and interdependent, they are neither religion-specific nor culture-specific. Accordingly, socially engaged dialogue is concerned with how Buddhists and Christians have mutually apprehended common experiences and resources for working together to help human beings liberate themselves, and nature, from systemic global forces of oppression (Thich Nhat Hanh 1987).

It was Thomas Merton who over forty years ago coined the term “monastic dialogue” to refer to what is now called “interior dialogue” (Burton, Hart, and Laughlin 1975: 309–317). Buddhist–Christian interior dialogue is concerned

with how in the human struggle for liberation Buddhists and Christians share an experiential “common ground” that enables them to hear one another and be mutually transformed in the process. Hence, interior dialogue emphasizes Buddhist and Christian practice traditions—for example, meditation and centering prayer—with Christians participating in Buddhist meditative techniques and Buddhists participating in Christian techniques of centering and contemplative prayer.

While conceptual, socially engaged, and interior dialogues each have unique emphases, in fact they are interdependent. This is because conceptual dialogue is foundational to social justice issues, and vice versa, while conceptual and socially engaged dialogue is experientially grounded in Buddhist and Christian practice traditions. Accordingly, what follows is a descriptive account of the defining features of each particular form of dialogue that assumes inter-relatedness with the other two.



Conceptual Dialogue

Most Christian theological encounter with Buddhism was exclusivist because its purpose was to demonstrate the superiority of Christian tradition as the sole vehicle of humanity’s salvation.¹ But contemporary Christian encounter with Buddhism reflects the pluralism of postmodern, and some would argue, post-Christian cultural and religious diversity because Christian encounter with Buddhism, as well as Buddhist encounter with Christianity, is itself pluralistic. This pluralism is rooted in the history of Christian encounter with the world religions since the first century, a history in which there have existed a limited number of theological options for considering non-Christian religious traditions. But by the second half of the twentieth century, Christian theology of religions within some liberal circles took a new direction as many theologians recognized the truth and validity of non-Christian traditions. Partly as a negative reaction to this trend, neo-orthodox writers reasserted theological exclusivism by claiming that not only is Christian faith not one religion among others, it is not “religion” at all. For example, Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer defined “religion,” including Christian “religion,” as a human activity, while Christian “faith” is trust in God’s decisive action in the world through the historical Jesus as the Christ. Such trust does not result from the human will to believe, but is an absolute gift originating in God’s grace. Neither Protestant neo-orthodoxy nor pre-Vatican II Catholic theology took the world’s religious traditions seriously as objects of theological reflection.

Two important transitional Protestant figures emerged in the mid-twentieth century: Paul Tillich and Jürgen Moltmann, both of whom set important theological precedents for Christian conceptual dialogue with Buddhism. After Tillich's encounter with important Buddhist philosophers in Japan that resulted in the publication of his *Christianity and the Encounter with the World's Religions* (1963), he concluded that his "method of correlation" was inadequate for judging the truth of non-Christian religions. His "method of correlation" was deeply influenced by Søren Kierkegaard's existentialist philosophy and asserted that the universal questions all human beings have about the meaning of existence are most completely answered by Christian revelation. Until his encounter with Zen Buddhism, he did not seriously entertain the possibility that there might exist more adequate Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, or Islamic answers to these universal questions. Accordingly, Tillich began reflecting on how Christian encounter with the world's religions might creatively transform both Christian theology and Christian experience. Unfortunately, he died before he could develop his evolving insights into a systematic theology of religions.

Moltmann wrote of the necessity for Christian encounter with the world's religions as a means not only for Christian renewal, but the renewal of non-Christian religions as well in an increasingly secularizing world. He believed that before Christians can enter into fruitful dialogue with non-Christians, two Christian prejudices must be renounced: the absolutism of the church and the absolutism of Christianity. Moltmann's theology of religions is intentionally inclusivist. For him, faith as trust in God's actions for humanity and the entirety of existence—past, present, and future—makes dialogue with non-Christians not only possible, but a theological necessity. This is so because he believed the reality encountered by faithful Christians in the life, death, and resurrection of the historical Jesus as the Christ has also been encountered by human beings through non-Christian experiences and practices (Moltmann 1977: 151 ff.).

A number of important Christian and Buddhist voices have extended Tillich's and Moltmann's views by devoting attention to Buddhist-Christian conceptual dialogue as an important element in their theologies.² For purposes of illustration, three writers (two Protestants and one Roman Catholic) will serve as an illustration: John B. Cobb, Jr., John P. Keenan, and Hans Küng.

According to Cobb, the practice of Buddhist-Christian dialogue entails a process he calls "passing beyond dialogue" (1982: 89–116). Since theological reflection is itself a dialogical process, "passing beyond dialogue" names the process of continual theological engagement in dialogue as a contributive factor of one's growth in Christian faith. He assumes the same process will occur

for Buddhists as well, who, faithful to Buddhist tradition, go beyond dialogue with Christian tradition. In his understanding, dialogue is a theological practice involving two interdependent movements: (1) in dialogue with Buddhists, Christians should intentionally leave the conventional boundaries of Christian tradition and enter into Buddhist thought and practice; (2) followed by a return to Christian faith enriched, renewed, and “creatively transformed,” which is the goal of “passing beyond dialogue.”³ “Creative transformation” names the process of critically appropriating whatever one has learned from dialogue into one’s own faith, whereby one’s faith is challenged, enriched, and renewed. For Christians, the image of creative transformation is the historical Jesus, who explicitly provides a focal point of unity in which the many centers of meaning that characterize the present “post-Christian” age of religious pluralism are harmonized. Because Cobb thinks that no truth can be contradictory if really true, Christians can and should be open to the “structures of existence” of the other “religious ways” of humanity (1975: 21, 58).

For example, Cobb thinks that there are remarkable affinities between the Mahāyāna Buddhist notion of “emptying” (*shūnyatā*) and Whitehead’s doctrine of the “primordial nature of God,” as well as biblical portrayals of God and human selfhood. According to Buddhist teaching, since “non-self” constitutes all things and events because all things and events are “empty” of “self-existence” (*svabhāva*), there are no permanent “things” or “events.” Since according to process theology, God aims at the concrete realization of all possibilities in their proper season, God is “empty” of substantial selfhood insofar as “self” is understood as an essence that can be preserved by excluding “other” things and events. It is here that Cobb and other process theologians separate themselves from classical Christian theism. In his view, theology should reject notions of God as an unchanging substance as well as the immortality of the human soul by reappropriating biblical, especially Pauline, teaching. In other words, dialogue with Buddhism, mediated through Whiteheadian process philosophy, brings Christian faith and practice into closer alignment with biblical tradition, since classical Christian teaching that God is an unchanging substance and the doctrine of an immortal soul are contradictory to biblical tradition and the “structure” of Christian existence.

Perhaps the most radical attempt to reinterpret Christian theology through the categories of Buddhist doctrine is John Keenan’s reading of Christian tradition through the lenses of the metaphysics of Yogācāra (“Way of Yoga”) and the Madhyamaka (“Middle Way”) epistemology of Nāgārjuna as a means of clarifying New Testament understandings of the historical Jesus as the Christ (1989a; 1989b: Introduction; and 1999: 186–199). Keenan sees his theological task as developing new forms of Christological thought capable of expressing

faith in ways relevant to postmodern experience of the relativity of all normative claims about reality. Accordingly, Keenan's theological construction of a "Mahāyāna Christology" focuses on demonstrating how the Christ incarnated in the historical Jesus is also the "heart of wisdom" attested to in the Gospel of John, the Synoptic Gospels, the Pauline Epistles, and the Epistle of James.

By "heart of wisdom" Keenan means experiential apprehension of the structures of existence as interdependent, an apprehension he believes is at the core of both Buddhist thought and biblical tradition. Keenan's primary motivation is to regain contact with biblical meanings as a way of reinterpreting classical Christological doctrines that will be spiritually relevant in a postmodern, post-Christian age characterized by religious pluralism. The Christian textual sources of his Mahāyāna theology lie in the wisdom traditions of the Hebrew Bible and Christian experience of God as the wisdom incarnate in the historical Jesus, as well as all things and events in space-time (John 1:1–14). He believes that the Mahāyāna Buddhist name for this wisdom is "Emptying" or *shūnyatā* which, Keenan acknowledges, has no theistic connotations in Buddhist tradition whatsoever. Nevertheless, he argues that what Yogācāra philosophy and Madhyamaka epistemology describe as "wisdom," meaning the experiential apprehension of all things and events as empty of independent and permanent self-existence, or "own being" (*svabhāva*), is similar to biblical teaching regarding Christ as the Wisdom (*Logos*) through which God creates and sustains the universe. Accordingly, Keenan argues that Wisdom is incarnated not only in the historical Jesus but also in all things and events at every moment of space-time. In this way, Buddhist teachings about interdependence and Emptying clarify Christian experience and the "emptiness" of all things and events of permanent "own-being."

In place of thinking of the historical Jesus as the Christ in terms of an identifiable metaphysical substance (e.g., as was affirmed in the Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds), Keenan argues that Christian theology should shed all essentialist metaphysics by concentrating on the themes of emptying and non-self. Nowhere did Jesus as portrayed in the Gospel of John and the Synoptic Gospels, the Pauline Epistles, and the Epistle of James assume the existence of a permanent self that remains self-identical through time. Rather, these texts specifically identify the historical Jesus with wisdom, meaning in its New Testament context, an immediate awareness of God as Father (*abba*). Or as Keenan writes, in the heart of Christian Wisdom, the historical Jesus "disappears in the reality he proclaims. In Ch'an (Zen) Buddhist terms, he is a finger pointing at the moon" (1989b: 228).

Unlike the liberal Protestants cited in this chapter, Roman Catholic theologians have not sought to creatively transform Catholic doctrine through

the appropriation of Buddhist doctrines. This is so because contemporary Catholic dialogue with the world's religions assumes, in several forms, Karl Rahner's theology of religions, the center of which is his notion of "anonymous Christianity." Stated simply, Rahner concluded that to the degree that non-Catholics are living creatively according to their specific religious traditions, non-Christians are in touch with the same realities most fully revealed in the theology and sacraments of Catholic Christianity. Hence faithful non-Christians are "anonymous Christians" who need conversion to the more fully revealed truths of Roman Catholic faith and practice. For this reason, contemporary Roman Catholic dialogue with the world's religions assumes an inclusivist theology of religions.

Among the best-known Roman Catholic theologians engaged in conceptual dialogue with Buddhism is Hans Küng. While Küng does not explicitly employ Rahner's notion of anonymous Christianity, he draws similar conclusions to Rahner's. For Küng, Catholic Christianity is the "ordinary way of salvation," while persons living at the depths of non-Christian traditions are in touch with less fully revealed truths similar to Catholic teachings and practices. This means that non-Christian traditions are "extraordinary ways of salvation," since God's grace has not been without witnesses. But like Rahner, he asserts that non-Christians need to be brought into a fuller relation with the full truth of Roman Catholicism.

Specifically, Küng's dialogue with Buddhism employs a comparative methodology: relying on scholarship in Buddhist studies, he is concerned with pointing out the similarities between Buddhist and Christian doctrines and practices along with their incommensurable differences. His theological goal is the clarification of differences in order to help Christians gain accurate comprehension of Christian tradition while simultaneously helping Buddhists obtain accurate understanding of Buddhism. His starting point is his comparison of the historical Jesus with the historical Buddha and the roles of Jesus and the Buddha in Christian and Buddhist tradition. He notes "a fundamental similarity not only in Jesus's and the Buddha's conduct but also in their message: "both were teachers whose authority lay in their experience of ultimate reality; both had urgent messages, although the content of each differed, which demanded of people fundamental changes of attitude and conduct; neither intended to give philosophical explanations of the world nor did they aim to change existing legal and social structures; both worked from the assumption that all human beings are in need of redemption and transformation; both saw the root of humanity's unredeemed state in human egoism, self-seeking, and self-centeredness; both taught ways of redemption" (Küng 1986: 322).

For Küng, it is the differences between Jesus and the Buddha that are most profound and important, which he characterizes as the “smiling Buddha” and the “suffering Christ.” It is here that the incommensurable difference between Christian and Buddhist tradition are found, differences that make it impossible for either Christianity or Buddhism to be mutually creatively transformed through dialogue. For example, both Jesus and the Buddha experienced suffering, which is the first Noble Truth in Buddhism: all existence is suffering (*dukkha*). Release from suffering is possible through self-discipline in the practice of meditation, which is the sole means of achieving Awakening, the attainment of which leads to no further rebirth in the realm of *samsaric* suffering. Awakened Ones, that is “Buddhas,” are eventually “extinct,” no longer involved in the cycles of rebirth that constitute existence. This means that Buddhas show the way to Awakening, but they are not “saviors” or “redeemers.”

But for Christians, the historical Jesus as the Christ is the Way. That is, Jesus became the way of salvation, meaning eternal life in the kingdom of God made manifest in his life, death, and resurrection. Salvation comes only through trust (faith) in the historical Jesus as the Christ expressed through social engagement with the world in the struggle to create a human community based on love and justice. Accordingly, Awakening in Buddhist tradition and “salvation” in Christian tradition are not identical concepts or experiences, even though Christians can learn much from the practice of Buddhist traditions of meditation. Even so, Küng concludes that Buddhists indeed experience what Christians experience as “salvation” through Christ’s “extraordinary” working through the traditions of faithful Buddhists, some of whom have attained Awakening. Therefore, while Christians can and should be open to Buddhist experience and can learn much from Buddhist insights regarding interdependence, non-self, and suffering and its causes, the “ordinary” way of salvation is through faith in the historical Jesus as the Christ.

Unlike liberal Protestant conceptual dialogue with Buddhism, which assumes a monotheistic worldview, Buddhist conceptual dialogue with Christianity has not sought the creative transformation of Buddhist doctrines through the appropriation of aspects of Christian theological tradition into Buddhism. This is so because Buddhist teaching and practice is hardwired to a non-theistic worldview. Change or delete any item from this worldview, Buddhism ceases to be “Buddhist.” All schools of Buddhism, in their own distinctive ways, are theoretical interpretations of this worldview.

Foundational to Buddhist doctrine is the Buddha’s teaching that all existence is implicated in suffering and impermanence (*dukkha* and *anitya*); that we cause suffering for ourselves and others by clinging (*trṣṇā*) to permanence in an impermanent universe; that release from suffering is possible; that the

Noble Eightfold Path is the ethical and meditative practice that leads to the cessation of suffering and the achievement of Awakening (*nirvāṇa*). Crucial to the Buddha's teaching about the structure of impermanent existence are the doctrines of interdependence (*pratītya-samutpāda*) and non-self (*anātman*). "Non-self" means that all things and events at every moment of space-time are constituted by the ceaselessly changing interrelationships things and events undergo from moment to moment of their existence. Accordingly, Awakening is achieved through self-disciplined ethical and meditational practice, not through reliance on the grace of God. For most Buddhist teachers, worship of a deity is merely another form of clinging to a nonexistent permanent entity, the result of which can only lead to individual and communal suffering. In other words, a difference exists between the structure of Buddhist existence and the structure of Christian existence that make it difficult for Buddhists to engage in conceptual dialogue with non-Buddhists. However, this is not to assert that no Buddhists have conceptually engaged in dialogue with Christianity. In fact, it can be argued that the first contemporary Buddhist–Christian conceptual dialogue began in Japan in 1957.

This dialogue has its origins in the early twentieth century in the work of Nishida Kintarō (1879–1945). Under his leadership, the philosophy department of Kyoto University began a conceptual dialogue with Christianity. Several disciples of Nishida—Tanabe Hajime (1885–1962), Hisamatsu Shin'ichi (1899–1980), and Masao Abe (1915–2006)—formed what is now called the "Kyoto School." The Buddhist tradition espoused by the Kyoto school was Zen Buddhism, coupled with an interest in Western Continental philosophy, particularly Kantian idealism. While utilizing Western idealist philosophy, the Kyoto School also employed Buddhist philosophy, particularly Madhyamika epistemology and Zen traditions of meditation, to seek the absolute truth, identified as "Emptying," that is beyond all rational discourse. Perhaps the clearest expression of the Kyoto School's philosophical methods and goals is Hisamatsu's *Tōyo-teki Mu* or *Oriental Nothingness*, written in 1939.

Following World War II, Hisamatsu sent his student Masao Abe to Union Theological Seminary to study Christianity under Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr. Then, in 1957, Hisamatsu traveled to Harvard for the fall semester and engaged Tillich in several meetings that mark the beginning of Buddhist Conceptual dialogue with Christianity (see De Martino 1971–73). Hisamatsu was particularly interested in Tillich's notion of "God beyond God" and his understanding of human nature. Specifically, Hisamatsu's focus was on what Zen calls the "Formless Self," rather than on what is doctrinally unique in Buddhist or Christian teaching. Following his teacher's lead, Abe transformed Nāgārjuna's epistemological understanding of "Emptying" into a

metaphysically absolute ultimate reality which is the ground of all religious experience, but which manifests itself most clearly in Buddhist, particularly Zen, teachings and practices. Thus, Christians who realize the experiential depth of their particular doctrines partially glimpse “Emptying” even if they think they are experiencing God. This implies the Christians are “anonymous Buddhists,” although Abe did not use this terminology.

An eminent Thai Buddhist, Bhiikkhu Buddhadasa (1906–1993), further refined Buddhist conceptual dialogue with Christianity with his “two languages theory”: (1) dharma language and (2) conventional language. The teachings of all religious traditions, Buddhism included, is “conventional language,” while “dharma language” refers to the language that expresses Awakening, which is only achieved through the practice of meditation. Thus, while the conceptual differences between religious traditions are real, all religions are united in the higher truth concerning reality, to which Buddhist and non-Buddhists refer in the paradoxes of “dharma language.” But there exists a deeper level of religious experience in which all conceptual distinctions melt away with the attainment of Awakening. Buddhadasa’s inclusivist viewpoint is also an ingredient in the Dalai Lama’s philosophy of religious pluralism: different religious traditions share a common religious goal that each seeks in its own distinctive way. But the truth of Awakening transcends all religious distinctions, including Buddhist distinctions.



Socially Engaged Dialogue

Although Buddhists tended to be more interested in socially engaged dialogue with Christians than conceptual dialogue, Christian conceptual dialogue with Buddhists has also generated interest in the relevance of Buddhism to issues of social, environmental, economic, and gender justice. As previously noted, since these issues are systemic, global, interconnected, and interdependent; they are neither religion-specific nor culture-specific. Accordingly, Buddhists and Christians have mutually apprehended common experiences and resources for working together to liberate human beings and nature from the global forces of systemic oppression.

The Vietnamese Zen monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, is given credit for coining the term “social engagement” in 1963 as a description of the Buddhist anti-war movement in Vietnam. But, in fact, the Buddhist Renewal Movement in Vietnam first coined this term as *nham gian Phat Giao* in the 1930s (Rawlins-Way 2008: 56). Nevertheless, because of Thich Nhat Hanh’s leadership of the

Buddhist antiwar movement in the 1960s, “social engagement” is now the most common term designating Buddhist social activism. No current scholar has written about Buddhist social engagement more clearly than Sallie B. King ([1999] 2006: 159–162). She describes Buddhist and Christian social activism as “spiritual social activism,” which excludes those who use their participation in a religious tradition to justify hatred and aggression. She notes that socially engaged dialogue has been ongoing since the end of the nineteenth century and further notes that, although he was not a Buddhist, Mahatma Gandhi was a model for social engagement for both Buddhists like Thich Nhat Hanh and Christians like Martin Luther King Jr.

Three elements define Buddhist social engagement. First, Buddhist social activists in all of their endeavors must, in the words of Thich Nhat Hanh, “be peace” in order to “make peace.” Or as the Dalai Lama phrases the same principle, “Everyone loves to talk about calm and peace, whether in family, national or international contexts, but without *inner* peace, how can we make peace real?” (Tenzin Gyatso 1995: 85). Since all things and events are interdependent, working for peaceful social change through compassionate non-violence requires the practice of meditation, the point made in Thich Nhat Hanh’s formula, “outer work involves inner work.” That is, one who has experienced interdependence through meditation simultaneously sees through the delusion of separate selfhood.⁴ The result is that things and events, including forms of injustice, are apprehended truly without illusion, so that one’s social activism actually reflects the realities of particular situations of injustice. One’s self is never separate from another human or nonhuman being; the oppressed is never separate from the oppressor.

Second, this means that Buddhist understanding of compassion is not only grounded in the doctrine of interdependence but also in the doctrine of non-self. Cultivating experiential awareness of selflessness is the core of Buddhist spirituality and the center of Buddhist social activism. The practice of meditation is the “skillful means” (*upāya*) through which one seeks to eradicate one’s preoccupation with oneself in order to cultivate recognition of the sameness of one’s own and others’ value and one’s wish for the well-being of those others. One works for the well-being of another because one literally is the other.

Finally, the doctrine of *karma* plays an important role in Buddhist practice of social engagement in two ways: (1) the role karma plays in the construction of one’s present and future identity; and (2) understanding that violent reaction against a person who does injury—returning violence with violence—always causes negative results for both the receiver of violence and the perpetrator of violence. Violent actions, even in violent self-defense against an aggressor, merely add to the spiraling cycle of violence.

The structure of Buddhist social engagement is a primary interest of Christians who are socially engaged in dialogue with Buddhists. Contemporary Christian social activism is deeply rooted in liberation theology. While the word “liberation” is not often used in Buddhist social activism, examples of Buddhist struggle for what Christians call “liberation” abound: Dr. B. Ambedkar, who led millions of ex-untouchable Hindus to Buddhism; Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne, the founder of the Sarvodaya Sramadana movement in Sri Lanka, whose goal is to establish new social structures that embody Buddhist values so that both individuals and society can achieve Awakening; the Dalai Lama’s non-violent Tibetan liberation movement; Sulak Sivaraksa’s “gadfly” attempts to lead the Thai government away from participation in drug trafficking and the sex trade in South Asia; the Won Buddhist movement of South Korea; the Nichiren Buddhist movements of Rissho Koseikai and Soka Gakkai in Japan; and the Fo Huang Shan movement in Taiwan (see Queen and King 1996: chs. 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10).

The term “liberation” in Christian theology, according to Gustavo Gutierrez, has two meanings (Gutierrez 1973: 36). First, “liberation” refers to the worldwide aspirations of oppressed human beings. In this sense, “liberation” names a struggle that places oppressed human beings and nature at odds with oppressive national, social, and economic systems. “Liberation practice” is active engagement with these oppressive systemic forces. Second, “liberation” assumes a particular understanding of history. Christian liberation theologians, for example, tend to see history as a process in which human beings gradually assume conscious responsibility for their own individual destiny and collective global future. “Accurate and usable history,” to borrow a term from feminist thought, is a major theme emerging in the struggle to establish political and economic justice.

Of course, what liberation practice means will be nuanced differently in Buddhist social engagement and Christian social activism. For Christians, the central image of liberation is the historical Jesus as the Christ who brings liberation to human beings not only from the bondage of sin and death but also from the social, economic, and political sins of oppression. The model for liberation for Theravāda Buddhists is the enlightened practice of Gautama the Buddha, and for Mahāyāna Buddhists, all Buddhas and bodhisattvas.⁵ Awakening engenders compassionate action skillfully applied to help liberate all sentient beings from suffering. For Christians thinkers like Paul F. Knitter (1996), the quest for liberation provides a common ground for inter-religious dialogue in general and Buddhist–Christian dialogue in particular.

One of the most important forms of Buddhist–Christian socially engaged dialogue focuses on the liberation of women from patriarchal oppression. Androcentrism and patriarchy usually go hand in hand in Buddhist and Christian feminist writing. Androcentrism names a mode of consciousness,

a thought-form, and a method of gathering information and classifying women's place in a male-defined metaphysical view of reality. Androcentric thought asserts that the structure of humanity has one defining center, so that masculinity is the sole norm for measuring what is human. As a worldview, androcentrism occurs in both masculine and feminine heads, with patriarchy being the institutionalized expression of androcentrism. This means that patriarchy always expresses itself as a gender hierarchy that places men over women.

Here, Buddhist and Christian feminists in socially engaged dialogue agree on four points. First, whenever any religious tradition chooses to preserve which literature to keep and whose experiences to preserve in their historical records, it usually operates with a male-centered set of values. Stories about men and the thought and practices of men are far more likely to be recorded than stories about what women did or said. Second, even when a religious tradition preserves significant records about what women said or did, later developments tend to ignore these stories and stress male stories as authoritative for faith and practice. Third, Western and non-Western scholarship on the world's religions still largely agrees with these male-centered biases. Finally, all contemporary forms of the world's religions continue to maintain an unrelenting, ongoing androcentrism.

Consequently, Buddhists and Christian feminists like Rita M. Gross and Nancy R. Howell seek to reconstruct Buddhist and Christian tradition through recovering an accurate and usable past that focuses on the pluralism of Buddhist and Christian women's experiences. "Accuracy" has to do with feminism as an academic methodology of historical investigation, while "usability" refers to the feminist goal of liberating both women and men from patriarchy (Gross 1993: 31–48; Howell 2006: ch. 1). But as important as accurate and usable history is, the liberation of women is interdependent with humanity's liberation from social, political, and economic oppression because women are generally the most socially, politically, and economically exploited human beings in every culture and religious context.

The liberation of women from oppression is also interdependent with the liberation of the environment from human exploitation. Accordingly, the lesson of Buddhist–Christian socially engaged dialogue is this: to the degree that women achieve liberation from patriarchal oppression, to that degree do all human beings achieve social, political, and economic liberation; to that degree does the Earth achieve liberation from human oppression; to that degree is life itself liberated from the threat of human-caused environmental destruction.



Interior Dialogue

If the participants in Buddhist–Christian interior dialogue are to be believed, Christians and Buddhists in the common struggle for liberation share an experiential referent that enables them to hear one another and be mutually transformed in the process. In the pursuit of spiritual transformation “within,” Buddhists and Christians participate in Buddhist and Christians practice disciplines and reflect on the resulting experiences. Since spiritual and monastic disciplines continue to energize Roman Catholic experience, monastic disciplines like centering prayer and contemplative prayer have, since Luther’s time, been viewed as forms of “works righteousness.” Due to the fact that these were deemphasized in Protestant tradition, Roman Catholics have generally paid more attention to Buddhist–Christian interior dialogue than Protestants. In this regard, Thomas Merton’s encounter with the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan monks, Thai Buddhist monks, and Zen teachers still serves as a paradigm for Christian interior dialogue with Buddhism (Merton 1975: 309–325).

Merton’s frustration with the state of monasticism as he had experienced it as a Trappist was the motivating force of his engagement with the world’s religions in general and Buddhism in particular. Toward the end of his life he had reached the conclusion that Christian monasticism should be reformed through dialogue with Buddhist monks and nuns through the mutual participation in and sharing of Christian and Buddhist meditative techniques and experiences. The purpose of “contemplative dialogue,” as he referred to what is now called “interior dialogue,” is to discover whether there exist similarities and analogies in Christian and Buddhist experience in spite of the doctrinal differences between them. He concluded that while such differences will always differentiate Christian and Buddhist traditions, different worldviews do not invalidate the existential similarities of meditation, centering prayer, and contemplative prayer. He grew to believe that the realities experientially encountered by both Buddhists and Christians are beyond the power of doctrine to delimit and specify in any complete way (Cunningham 1999: 155–182).

Inspired by Merton, Raimundo Panikkar, in *The Silence of God, the Answer of the Buddha*, explored the conceptual incommensurability between Christian theism and Buddhist non-theism as a means of helping Christians search for new meanings of God beyond the limits of the traditional categories of Euro-American theological tradition. Unlike Cobb’s primarily conceptual dialogue with Buddhism, Panikkar combines interior dialogue with conceptual dialogue. This reflects Panikkar’s training as a Jesuit schooled in the practices of Catholic monastic theology, particularly the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola. His intention is to help Christians experience, as well as rationally comprehend, that the object of Christian faith is a reality beyond

the boundaries of theological language. Thus, Christians need to hear “the answer of the Buddha”: the ultimate reality to which the Buddha awoke as non-personal and beyond the limits of language. Appropriating the Buddha’s “answer” becomes for Panikkar a method of “entering the silence,” as Merton phrased it, beyond the boundaries of doctrinal description, even those of Christian theology (Panikkar 1989: ch. 10).

“Entering the silence” has always been the mutual goal of Christian and Buddhist contemplative and monastic training. Among Catholic Christians engaged in interior dialogue with Buddhism, Rubin Habito is unique in that as a Jesuit he trained in Zen meditation under Yamada Koun Roshi (1907–1989) and received Yamada Roshi’s *inko* or “seal of approval.”⁶ Like Panikkar, Habito is also interested the implications of interior dialogue for conceptual and socially engaged dialogue. The central theological question he brings to his interior dialogue with Buddhism centers on the question of liberation. He argues that since both Christian and Buddhist practices are methods of experiencing liberation, he is interested in the core of Buddhist and Christian identity, symbolized by the Buddha’s Awakening experience under the Tree of Awakening (the Bo Tree) and Jesus as the Christ hanging from the cross.

For example, in an essay entitled “The Resurrection of the Dead and the Life Everlasting: From a Futuristic to a Realized Christianity,” Habito points to an article in the Apostles’ Creed—“I believe in . . . the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting”—as the source for what he believes is the interplay between the “future outlook” and, borrowing a phrase from Zen Buddhism, the “realized outlook” of Christian experience. While both outlooks are interdependent and presuppose faith as trust in the promises of eternal life made manifest in the historical Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection (the future outlook), Habito argues that the resurrection is simultaneously a present reality open to anyone who accepts Christ in the here-and-now (the realized aspect). Accordingly, Christian faith’s realized aspect manifests the experience of eternal life and resurrection in the here-and-now moment of the experience of faith. In this way, Zen’s stress on experiencing the here-and-now moment of experience can help Christians appreciate the realized aspect of the Christian experience of liberation more fully (Habito [1999] 2006: 223–238; also see Habito 1993).

Perhaps the most important collective example of interior dialogue was “The Gethsemani Encounter.” In 1978, ten years after Merton’s death, two Catholic dialogue commissions were created: the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID) in North America and the Dialogue Inter-Monastic (DIM) in Europe. From these two commissions evolved the Spiritual Exchange in Europe and the Hospitality Program in North America, programs in which Buddhist

monks and nuns spent time living in Catholic monasteries in the West, while Christian monastics were guests in Zen and Tibetan monasteries in Asia. Prior to the 1993 Parliament of World Religions, Fr. Julian von Duerbeck, OSB, and Br. Wayne Teasdale proposed that the MID host an interfaith dialogue session at the Parliament with the Dalai Lama and other Buddhist leaders. It was the Dalai Lama who suggested that the monastic dialogue be continued at Thomas Merton's monastery, Gethsemani Abbey, near Bardstown, Kentucky. This meeting is now called "the Gethsemani Encounter." The encounter lasted five days and included twenty-five invited Buddhist monks and nuns and twenty-five Catholic monks and nuns, plus a few Protestants.

The topic of the Gethsemani Encounter was the "spiritual unity" underlying the doctrinal plurality of Buddhist and Christian spiritual practices. As summarized by the Dalai Lama:

Now, it is also quite clear that different religious traditions—in spite of having different philosophies and viewpoints—all have great potential to help humanity by promoting human happiness and satisfaction. As a matter of fact, it is quite clear that given the vast array of humanity—of so many different kinds of people with different mental dispositions—we need, and so it is far better to have, a variety of religious traditions. Religions are like medicine in that the important thing is to cure human suffering. . . . Here too, it is not a question of which religion is superior as such. The question is, which will better cure a particular person.

1998: 47

Similarly, in his description of Contemplative prayer as a form of "mindfulness," Pierre-François de Béthune, OSB, observed that:

with a heart enlarged by love of God that embraces all of creation, he or she is spontaneously in communion with all those who suffer and all those who follow the spiritual life, *whatever their religion*. Ultimately, the prayer of the Holy Spirit that brings us into communion with all of humanity and even the whole creation which, as St. Paul says, groans and travails in pain (Rom 8:26). Conversely, the opportunity to meet other fellow pilgrims stimulates us to deepen our prayer.

Béthune 1998: 82

According to the participants at Gethsemani, specific meditative and contemplative prayer techniques lead Buddhists and Christians practitioners to a unitive experience of an Absolute Reality, named differently by Buddhists

and Christians, that both transcends while simultaneously immanent within all things and events at every moment of space-time. Known in Christian mystical theology as “apophatic” experience, this experience is unitary in structure for both Buddhists and Christians. During such experiences, subject-object differentiations and conceptual differences utterly drop away from consciousness so that reality, “the way things really are in contrast to the way our egos wish or desire things to be,” is apprehended without doctrinal categories. The Buddhist and Christian participants also agreed that such apprehension engenders compassionate wisdom through which one is empowered to creatively engage the sources of human and environmental suffering at work in the world. In other words, Buddhist meditation in its plurality of forms, as well as Christian centering and contemplative prayer in their plurality of forms, engender structurally similar experiences for Buddhists and Christians in spite of the conceptual differences that guide the practices of meditation and centering and contemplative prayer.

Still, Buddhist participants at Gethsemani agreed that five doctrinal assumptions guide the practice of meditation in its various specific disciplines.

- (1) Since the development of mindfulness requires the avoidance of negative activities, ethical self-discipline is the foundation of the specific techniques of meditation.
- (2) Meditation can be practiced by concentrating on just one object—this is called “stabilizing meditation” in Tibetan Meditation.
- (3) Meditation can be “analytical, as in Theravada “calming” (*samatha*) and “insight” (*vipassanā*) meditation, through which reason and emotions, both positive and negative, can be replaced by non-egoistic responses like compassion that creates the apprehension of universal interdependence.
- (4) Meditation may also be a reflection on the various levels of a spiritual path.
- (5) Meditation may involve visualization techniques, chanting mantras, or simply focusing on one’s breathing rhythm or a *koan*.

“Meditation” names a collection of mental techniques meant to experimentally confirm the truth of Buddhism’s worldview and defining doctrines (see Ingram 2009: 112).

Likewise, the goal of Christian contemplative practices—*lectio divina* (“divine reading”), centering prayer, and contemplative prayer—is experiential confirmation of the truth of Christians doctrines about God as incarnated in the life,

death, and resurrection of the historical Jesus as the Christ. Comparing the goals of Buddhist meditation with Christian contemplative practices, Donald Mitchell writes that:

in reading the description of the qualities of a person who abides in *Nibbana*, namely compassion, loving kindness, sympathetic joy, and equanimity—one recognizes the qualities of a person who abides in the Kingdom of God. On the other hand, while *Nibbana* is primarily a state of consciousness, when *we* Christians gaze into the heart of our supreme refuge with the “mind of Christ,” we find a personal God who is “love.”

1998: 28



Concluding Observations

Christian theologians in conceptual dialogue with Buddhists testify that Christian theology has been positively affected by this encounter. Furthermore they deeply respect Buddhism and deeply admire Buddhists and their practices. None treat Buddhism as an error to be eradicated, although some like Karl Rahner and Hans Küng see distinctive Buddhist doctrines as incomplete truths that are fulfilled in Christianity. Nor is there a hidden missionary agenda in most Christian dialogue with Buddhism. Yet the very openness of Christians and Buddhists to the possibilities of mutual creative transformation through dialogue has brought to light issues and questions that are now setting the agenda for continuing Buddhist–Christian encounter. Four issues and an emerging consensus merit special comment.

First, Christians have tended to be more open to creative transformation through conceptual dialogue with Buddhism than have Buddhists been in conceptual dialogue with Christianity. In fact, Buddhist conceptual engagement with Christian theology has had little positive or negative impact on the development of contemporary Buddhist thought. The reason is that Buddhism is much more worldview specific than Christian tradition, even though one cannot be a Christian and reject monotheism in some form. That is, one can appropriate the worldviews of Marx, existentialism, Plato, Aristotle, or Neo-Platonism; one can be a Thomist or Neo-Thomist, a scientist, or even “a Buddhist, too,” according to John Cobb (1978: 1–20), and still be a Christian. But non-theism and the doctrines of impermanence, non-self, and dependent co-arising are so necessary to the structure of Buddhist faith

and practice that Buddhism is not open to a commensurate creative transformation through conceptual dialogue with Christianity. Accordingly, it does not seem appropriate to think of “creative transformation” of these defining Buddhist doctrines because they have been indispensable to Buddhist faith and practice for twenty-five hundred years. Without these defining doctrines, Buddhism ceases to be “Buddhist.” Thus, Christian theology as “faith seeking understanding” does not have a correlate in Buddhist experience. This fact should not be interpreted as evidence of Christian superiority and Buddhist inferiority. According to Buddhist self-understanding, doctrines are “vehicles” or “pointers” that guide the practice of meditation in the hope of awakening to an ultimate reality, a process called “Emptying” or *shūnyatā* in Mahāyāna Buddhism, that is absolutely beyond all conceptualities and symbols.

This fact has pushed current Christian–Buddhist conceptual dialogue to evolve beyond its earlier search for common doctrines and experiences to focus more on the “hard” issues of what appear to be incommensurable differences between Christian and Buddhist doctrines: Buddhist non-theism and Christian theism, the role of Jesus in Christianity and the role of the Buddha in Buddhism; Christian emphasis on faith and grace and Buddhist focus on the practice of meditation; the place of contemplative prayer in Christianity compared with the role of meditation in Buddhism. The main question behind this form of current conceptual dialogue is whether the doctrinal differences between Christianity and Buddhism are contradictory or complementary concepts that point to an ultimate reality transcending Christian and Buddhist experience. So far, a consensus has not emerged among Christians and Buddhist interested in this question (see Gross and Muck 2000).

The second issue concerns how to prevent Christian–Buddhist encounter from remaining an elitist intellectual enterprise of interest only to professional academic theologians, philosophers, ministers, priests, monks, and nuns. The solution lies in expanding the dialogue by including interested non-academic and lay Christian and Buddhist persons active in their religious communities into the discussion, both as listeners and teachers of intellectuals who may not have adequate perceptions of the actual religious experiences of ordinary Christians and Buddhists. For Christians, the goal is the Church’s creative transformation. For Buddhists, the question is what “creative transformation” means given the specific doctrinal content that defines Buddhism’s worldview. But the Christian community as a whole (the Church) and the Buddhist community as a whole (householders and the sangha) need to be brought into this discussion. Exactly how to do so is a matter on ongoing conversation between Christian theologians and Buddhists teachers.

Third, interior dialogue has brought a number of difficult and unresolved questions to consciousness that are now energizing much Christian–Buddhist discussion. What is the connection between theological and philosophical conceptualities to the specific experiences engendered by Christian contemplative prayer or Buddhist meditative discipline? How does theological expectation influence the experiences gained through contemplative prayer or Buddhist meditation? Carmelite nuns practicing contemplative prayer do not interpret their contemplative experience as “oneness with the Buddha Nature” that constitutes all existence at every moment of space-time. Nor do Zen Buddhist nuns practicing meditation interpret their experiences as union with Christ the Bridegroom. Do Christians practicing a Buddhist discipline of meditation guided by Christian theological assumptions obtain experiences a Buddhist could recognize as “Buddhist”? Do Buddhists practicing Christian contemplative prayer guided by the Buddhist worldview obtain “Christian” experiences? Are conceptual theological reflection and Buddhist doctrine inherently part of Christian and Buddhist spiritual disciplines? Does one not receive from a religious discipline what one’s tradition conceptually trains one to expect to receive? What are the connections between conceptual dialogue and interior dialogue?

Fourth, some Christians and Buddhists are now reflecting on the possibility of including the natural sciences and the social sciences as a “third partner” in their conceptual dialogue. What the natural sciences are revealing about the physical processes at play in the universe certainly have a bearing on Christian and Buddhist self-understanding and practice. All of the natural sciences and the social sciences—big bang cosmology, relativity theory, quantum mechanics, evolutionary biology, the cognitive sciences, economics—have relevance for the central doctrines of Christian and Buddhist tradition. For example, what are the implications of scientific cosmology, relativity theory, and quantum mechanics for Buddhism’s and Christianity’s worldviews and doctrines? What are the implications of the biological and ecological sciences for Christian and Buddhist doctrines? What do the cognitive sciences imply about the practice of Christian and Buddhist contemplative-meditative disciplines? How can the environmental sciences and economics be brought to bear on Buddhist–Christian socially engaged dialogue on issues of poverty and environmental injustice?

Finally, an important consensus seems to have emerged from contemporary Christian–Buddhist encounter. Conceptual, socially engaged, and interior dialogue are interdependent. Or to paraphrase the Epistle of James, “conceptual dialogue and interior dialogue apart from socially engaged dialogue is ‘dead’ for the same reasons that ‘faith without works is dead’” (James 1:17).

That is, the central point of the practice of Christian or Buddhist faith, in separation or in dialogue, is the liberation of human beings and all creatures in nature from forces of oppression and injustice and the mutually creative transformation of persons in community with nature. The wisdom that Buddhists affirm is engendered by awakening and the Christian doctrines of creation and incarnation point to the utter interdependency of all things and events at every moment of space-time—a notion also affirmed by contemporary physics and biology in distinctively scientific terms.⁷ Awareness of interdependency, in turn, engenders social engagement, because awareness of interdependence and social engagement are themselves interdependent. Thus, we experience the suffering of others as our suffering, the oppression of others as our oppression, the oppression of nature as our oppression, and the liberation of others as our liberation—and thereby we become empowered for social engagement.

Consequently, future Buddhist–Christian dialogue in all three of its forms needs to include focus on practical issues that are not religion-specific or culture-specific, meaning issues that confront all human beings regardless of what religious or secular label persons wear. This has become a major focus of Buddhist–Christian dialogue and is in agreement with Christians like Martin Luther, Martin Luther King Jr., and Mother Theresa; Buddhists like Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, and the Thai Buddhist layman Sulak Sivaraksa; the Hindu sage and activist Mahatma Gandhi; as well as Jewish and Islamic calls that we struggle for justice in obedience to Torah or surrender to Allah guided by the *Qur'an*: that religious faith and practice does not separate us from the world. Christian–Buddhist dialogue throws faithful Christians and Buddhists into the world's rough-and-tumble struggle for peace and justice. Buddhist–Christian dialogue is now guided by a concern for the liberation of all sentient beings, for as Christian and Buddhist doctrines affirm in common that we are all in this together. Distinctively Christian practices and distinctively Buddhist practices cannot have it any other way because in an interdependently becoming universe, there is no other way.

Notes

1. For a fuller account of Buddhist–Christian conceptual dialogue, see Ingram 2009: ch. 1.
2. These voices included: Winston L. King, Seiichi Yagi, Masaaki Honda, and Lynn de Silva. See Ingram 2009: 42–48, for details.
3. This enriching and dialectical inter-religious experience is also emphasized by John S. Dunne in his classic *The Way of all the Earth* (1986).

4. For more discussion of this connection, see the chapter by Anna Brown, this volume.
5. An important scholarly landmark in comparing the traditions in this domain is the volume edited by Lopez and Rockefeller 1987.
6. Another Jesuit who has been a leading figure in Christian–Buddhist dialogue is Robert Kennedy. Zen teacher in the White Plum lineage, he studied with Yamada Roshi in Kamakura, Japan, with Maezumi Roshi in Los Angeles, and with Bernard Glassman Roshi in New York. Glassman Roshi installed Kennedy as *sensei* in 1991 and conferred *Inka* in 1997. Kennedy Roshi is the author of *Zen Gifts to Christians* (2000) and *Zen Spirit, Christian Spirit* (1996).
7. For a wonderful summary of the current consensus among scientists regarding the interdependent and interconnected structure of the physical universe, see Peacocke 1993: 39–43. Also see Ingram 2009.

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Teaching Buddhist Bioethics

Damien Keown

Introduction

Over the years I have addressed issues in Buddhist bioethics in a number of different courses, in addition to authoring one of the few monographs on the subject (Keown 1995). Since my retirement, I no longer teach courses in this area, and as far as I am aware no one else does either.¹ Given the contemporary interest in both Buddhism and bioethics generally this is a lamentable hiatus, and I hope this chapter will encourage others to step in and help fill the gap. With this objective I offer my thoughts as to how a syllabus for such a course might be constructed.



Defining a Field

By contrast with the dearth of resources available for studying bioethics from a Buddhist perspective, anyone wishing to study bioethics from a Western secular or religious perspective is spoiled for choice. Almost every institution that teaches medicine will include a course in medical ethics as part of the training to prepare those working in healthcare for the ethical challenges they face in their professional lives. There is an abundant literature both in print and online on such topics, and world-renowned institutes such as the Kennedy Institute of Ethics and the Hastings Center not only provide teaching and research at the highest levels but also help inform public opinion through the media and shape public policy through participation in official bodies. These Western developments, however, have had very little impact elsewhere.

Adherents of the Asian religious traditions in general seem not to have felt the need to revisit their teachings in the light of new scientific developments. An important factor hindering progress in Buddhism has been the reluctance of the Buddhist sangha to involve itself publicly in scientific controversies. The traditional monastic education does not include science, and many monks are ignorant of new medical techniques and the issues they raise. Monks are uncomfortable discussing such subjects both from a lack of knowledge about them and the fact that matters such as sex and reproduction are seen as inappropriate subjects of conversation for those who have renounced home and family life. Monks are seen by the laity as being “above” such matters, and most householders (particularly women) would find a conversation on such topics to be awkward and inappropriate. Accordingly, the practice in Buddhist countries has been for such matters to be devolved to the secular authorities such as doctors and nurses, and few questions are raised publicly about the morality of contemporary medical research and practice. This situation is changing, but slowly.

Another reason for this neglect is that there are comparatively few ethics centers in Asia, and many of those that exist have been influenced by Western approaches, which is perhaps not surprising given the popularity of Western medicine. The pattern has been for Western bioethicists to find positions in Asia, or for Asian bioethicists to study overseas and then return to teach the methodologies they acquired in the West, perhaps with some adaptations to local contexts. As such, with few exceptions,² there is little sign as yet of authentically Asian or Buddhist approach to bioethics emerging.³ A further factor may be a cultural one, namely that most Buddhists do not perceive any threat or challenge to their traditional beliefs from recent scientific discoveries, and certainly not in the way this was experienced by Christians. Indeed, it was primarily the response of Christian thinkers to new medical technologies in the 1960s that gave rise to the new field of bioethics.

Many modern Buddhists, by contrast, feel that their religion—which is generally perceived among the elites as adopting a rational and empiricist outlook—resembles science in many ways and so they have little to fear from it (Ratanakul 2001). I think there is also a deeper explanation that has to do with the fact that Buddhists do not see their religion as imposing binding universally normative obligations with respect to personal morality. There also seems to be less expectation that action-guiding principles can be derived in advance through the application of moral logic. As Jeff Wilson notes, “Many commentators explicitly frame Buddhism in terms of open-armed compassion rather than boundary-drawing dogma, and as driven by ritual and practice rather than doctrine or rule” (2009: 188). Adopting a more contextual

approach means that Buddhists are reluctant to press a moral analysis in the systematic way this is often done in the West. Since the field of bioethics is dominated by Western approaches, however, there is no alternative to using concepts and resources that Western commentators have developed in the half-century since the subject originated.



A Buddhist Bioethics Course

It can be seen that any course introducing students to a Buddhist perspective on bioethics faces a number of challenges. Not the least of these, as noted, is that there are few resources and little developed thinking about Buddhist perspectives on such questions. To complicate matters further, the syllabus for a course of this kind brings together three broad fields of knowledge, each of which can be studied from a variety of perspectives using different methodologies. The first of these is Buddhism, the second is ethics, and the third is science. Students may have little background in any of these fields, and are very unlikely to be specialists in more than one of them, so the educator faces the daunting task of teaching the basics of all three before specific issues in bioethics can be raised. While preliminary courses in each of these would provide a solid foundation, it is unlikely to be possible to offer this within the constraints of a conventional curriculum and so an alternative approach needs to be identified.

Most courses in medical ethics are aimed at those working in health care and typically use scenarios to explore problems that health care professionals encounter in everyday practice. This has the advantage of grounding the subject in real-life contexts and making theory relevant to practice in a demonstrable way. It allows theoretical questions to be explored to the degree that students find necessary, as opposed to requiring them to master unfamiliar and complex philosophical concepts and terminology at the outset, an approach that can make the subject seem abstract and irrelevant. Interactive case-study participation can help bring the ethical issues to life, and the dramatization of sample scenarios in the classroom through role-playing is a valuable pedagogical tool. My experience has shown that it is through engaged participation that students best grasp the meanings and implications of ethical choices. Morality is grasped in action as students clarify and apply their values to cases, and the use of role-playing can assist in this as well as prepare them for discussion of controversial issues with others whose views they may not share. Active participation also fosters the development of “emotional intelligence,” which should be one of the major “learning outcomes” of a course of this kind.

This “intelligence” is not of the kind that assumes there must be one correct solution to every problem, but appreciates there is a continuum of appropriate and inappropriate solutions and knows how to discern the often fuzzy but critical dividing line between the two.

We might summarize the learning outcomes of such a course as three:

- (1) *Knowledge*. This is knowledge of the three overlapping subject areas mentioned above, namely Buddhism, ethics, and medicine. Daryl Macer (2008), on whose useful short work on teaching bioethics I am drawing here, terms this “transdisciplinary content knowledge.” In the present case it requires the integration of Buddhist beliefs and values, accurate medical and scientific facts, and key principles of ethical theory.
- (2) *Skills*. The skills required are multifaceted and involve “capacity-building” in the analysis of risks and benefits, the development of “informed choice,” creative thinking and decision-making skills, and the ability to foresee the advantages and disadvantages of new technologies. It also involves the ability to analyze moral dilemmas by breaking them down into their component parts of motive, action, and consequences.
- (3) *Personal moral development*. This involves a better understanding of cultural and moral diversity, the development of moral obligation and values including honesty and responsibility, and the clarification of personal moral standards, values, and ideals.

In order to achieve these learning outcomes, a variety of pedagogical strategies can be adopted, depending on the size, ability, and needs of the student group. Macer lists the following: “lectures, seminars, workshops, drama, narrative, role plays, case presentation and analysis, essay composition, small group discussion, on-line discussion forums, newsletters, public open discussion, media commentary and critiques” (2008: 6). The investigation of bioethical issues involves what is known as “complex learning,” a kind of learning that—unlike “simple learning” which has determinate outcomes—develops more slowly and is difficult to measure. Furthermore, since individuals have different capacities and develop the skills required at different speeds, it is desirable for the educator to adopt as broad a range of teaching methods as possible. These will be influenced to some degree by the student population: what is appropriate for a class of medical students, for example, may not be appropriate for humanities students, and vice versa. A useful selection of practical classroom techniques for use in teaching bioethics has been provided by Macer, and rather than repeat them here I refer the reader to his free online publication mentioned in the bibliography. A variety of assessment

methods will also be needed to assess the degree to which the different learning outcomes have been achieved. While knowledge of scientific facts and theories may be relatively easy to assess by traditional methods, it is not so easy to measure more complex learning achievements like personal moral development, and in such areas a self-assessment model supplemented by tutor feedback may be more appropriate.

As regards topics to be covered on the syllabus, there is an extensive range of possibilities. To illustrate this, the anthology on bioethics by Kuhse and Singer (2006) covers abortion, in vitro fertilization (IVF), surrogate mothering, pre-natal screening, cloning, genetics, euthanasia, medically assisted suicide, disabled newborns, brain death, advanced directives, resource allocation, organ donation, experimentation on human subjects, experimentation on animals, confidentiality and truth-telling, informed consent and patient autonomy, special issues in nursing practice, and the role of ethicists and ethics committees in health care systems. Only a small selection of these topics can realistically be covered in a standard introductory course, and given the problem of lack of background in some or all of the three areas mentioned, it is helpful to choose issues which have already been widely debated such as abortion, euthanasia, and cloning or stem cell research. This allows the instructor to key in to existing background knowledge and relevant personal experience without giving extensive introductory lectures which would reduce the time for the discussion of the scenarios. The risk, of course, is that students will tend to adopt familiar stock positions and express themselves through slogans rather than explore the issues in a critical and reflective way. To counter this tendency, the scenarios should as far as possible be drawn from unfamiliar contexts which bring out a distinctively Buddhist perspective. This will also allow students to see how profoundly cultural norms influence the way a debate is framed and conducted. At the same time, a selection of sample cases for study and discussion can help students appreciate the many nuances of an issue, and helpful practical examples can be found in Thiroux and Krasemann (2008). This book also provides handy summaries of the key points about the issues discussed as well as exercises for review that can help students prepare for classes.

While a typical course would examine a series of the issues listed above, in this chapter I will discuss only one: abortion. There are several reasons for this. The first is that I think it is preferable in the space available to discuss one topic in greater depth as opposed to several more superficially. The methodology described here can readily be applied to other topics depending on the interests of tutors. Second, abortion has been the most discussed and most controversial question in bioethics. Third, it provides a good foundation for a discussion of

the associated “beginning of life” issues, such as IVF, surrogacy, cloning, and the use of embryonic stem cells. Fourth, it is the only issue to have received any significant attention from a Buddhist perspective, and there is now a reasonable amount of secondary literature available for students to consult.



The Buddhist Background and the Centrality of Karma

Unless students have taken previous classes in Buddhism, some general background needs to be provided. There are many good introductory books explaining the basic teachings to which students can be confidently referred, some of which are listed in the bibliography. Importantly, students need to understand the meaning of basic concepts like Dharma, karma, and nirvana, and to understand how these terms fit together in the interlocking framework of teachings which constitute the Four Noble Truths. I usually describe Dharma as the ultimate foundation for Buddhist ethics and characterize it as a universal law which governs both the physical and moral order of the universe. The translation of Dharma “natural law” is useful in conveying the notion of a principle of order and regularity manifest in both natural phenomena and the moral order. It is important, of course, to point out that the Buddha discovered Dharma rather than invented it.

Buddhist ideas about no-self, karma, and rebirth can radically change the familiar Western perspective, and their implications need to be spelled as clearly as possible to students without entering into the more arcane doctrinal ramifications. I explain that in the moral order, Dharma is manifest in the law of karma, which governs the way moral deeds affect individuals in present and future lives. The main implications of belief in karma should be pointed out, for example, that not all the consequences of what a person does are experienced in the lifetime in which the deeds are performed. Karma that has been accumulated but not yet experienced is carried forward to the next life, or even many lifetimes ahead. It is important to mention that the doctrine of karma does not claim that everything that happens to a person is determined in advance, like predestination, and many of the things that happen in life may simply be non-karmic, and simply random accidents. For the same reason, it would be incorrect to assume that every illness or handicap is ultimately due to some moral failing in a past life.

The belief in karma and reincarnation intrigues students and some will wish to pursue the topic at greater length. Since this would take the course

too far off track I generally refer curious students to discussions such as those in the 2005 online conference held by the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*. The article by Dale S. Wright (2004) on revisioning karma is a good starting point. Students who have studied ethics previously may raise questions about the theoretical basis of Buddhist ethics, and whether the existence of belief in karma means that Buddhism is “consequentialist” in other words, whether it judges actions as right or wrong solely by reference to their results. Again, this is a discussion that could take the course far beyond its central theme. My own response to such questions is to say that there are various theoretical readings of Buddhist ethics available but that it is still too early to come to definitive conclusions. I tell students that along with other writers such as Cooper and James (2005), I personally see Buddhism as a form of virtue ethics given its emphasis on person moral and spiritual development, but it can also be seen as a form of “character consequentialism,” as in a recent interpretation by Charles Goodman (2009). There is also a Kantian reading available (Olson 1993), although so far little work has been done in this area. However, as this is a course in applied ethics it would be going too far afield to debate the merits of such theoretical questions at any length.

Students with some knowledge of medical ethics may ask if the “Four Principles” approach (Beauchamp and Childress 1989) can be successful in the context of Buddhism. This very influential methodology prioritizes four principles—benevolence, non-maleficence, autonomy, and justice—in the resolution of moral dilemmas. I believe it can be successfully applied in Buddhism, but has theoretical limitations like all of the approaches mentioned so far, not the least being how to resolve conflicts between the four principles.⁴ Fascinating though such questions are, to maintain momentum it is important to move on to discussion of substantive issues early in the course. Students who wish to explore the theoretical background further can do so in term papers, and there is a growing body of literature of the kind listed in the bibliography to which they can be directed.



Abortion

From a moral point of view, there are certain key questions that need to be addressed in any debate about abortion. These are: When does life begin? What is the moral status of the fetus? And, is a late abortion worse than an early one? In a course on Buddhist bioethics, a further set of questions concerns the Buddhist contribution to the debate and whether it has anything new to offer, such as a “middle way” that might break the Western

“pro-choice” versus “pro-life” deadlock, or practical methods such as rituals to help ease the guilt and distress that can be felt in the aftermath of an abortion or miscarriage.

Students are generally familiar with the main positions in the abortion debate (for convenience, let us label them “pro-life” and “pro-choice”) so there is no need to spend much time going over the basic ground. Before the first class, students could be asked to familiarize themselves with the main points of the debate by reading the chapter on abortion in Thiroux and Krasemann (2008) or any other good introductory textbook on contemporary ethics. Once the main points of contention have been clarified, I find it useful to move on to explore how Buddhist teachings could be used to support each position in turn. In other words, we ask: “What would a Buddhist ‘pro-life’ position look like?” and “What would a Buddhist ‘pro-choice’ position look like?” When the project is presented in this way, students find it easier to relate the new knowledge they will acquire about Buddhism to their existing understanding and personal sympathies with respect to abortion-related issues. Also, while most students will have a good grasp of scientific ideas about conception, they may be less clear about the process of implantation and the early stages of embryonic development. I find it useful, therefore, to provide a basic timetable of fetal development and to clarify the medical nomenclature (such as conceptus, embryo, and fetus) applicable to each stage. Students also need to understand what is meant by “viability” and the capacity of current medicine to save premature babies.

Equipped with the basic scientific knowledge, we turn to consider what Buddhist traditional teachings have to say on the matter. The ancient authorities, of course, had an imperfect knowledge of embryology, particularly concerning ovulation and conception, but their understanding of fetal development as a gradual process with a definite starting point was not very different in principle to that of modern science. In keeping with traditional Indian medical thought, the Buddha explained conception as a natural process that occurs when three specific conditions are fulfilled: (1) intercourse must take place; (2) during the woman’s fertile period; and (3) there must be available the between-life being (*gandharva*) of a deceased person seeking rebirth. When these conditions are present the *gandharva* (a figurative way of referring to the *viññāna* or consciousness of a recently deceased person) “descends” into the womb and a new life comes into being. The Buddhist account of conception here obviously diverges from the scientific one in requiring the presence of a spiritual entity to complete the process, but coincides in that it sees conception as occurring very close to the time of intercourse.

Once consciousness has “descended” into the womb and conception has occurred, the embryo develops through a set number of stages. In *The Path of*

Purification (236), Buddhaghosa lists four stages of the early embryo during the first month after conception. The first stage is the *kalala*, in which the tiny embryo is described as “clear and translucent,” and is likened to “a drop of purest oil on the end of a hair.” The following three stages are the *abudda*, the *pesi*, and the *ghana*, terms which connote increasing density and solidity. Sometimes a fifth stage, *pasākhā* (“five branched”), is mentioned, which is when the protuberances of the limbs and head become visible. Interpreting these traditional teachings in the light of modern scientific discoveries such as ovulation, the most common view among Buddhists today, particularly those from traditional countries, is that fertilization is the point at which individual human life commences.⁵ As a consequence abortion is widely seen as contrary to the first precept which prohibits causing harm or injury to living creatures.

But are all abortions equally bad, or are some worse than others? It is sometimes suggested that Buddhism regards late abortions as morally worse than earlier ones. This view is based on a remark of Buddhaghosa to the effect that the size of the victim is one of two important criteria (the other being sanctity)⁶ in assessing the gravity of breaches of the first precept. Since a fetus is considerably larger at the end of its term it has been argued that late abortions are worse than earlier ones. A point to bear in mind is that Buddhaghosa’s comments with respect to size were made with reference to animals. Thus, in his opinion, it is worse to kill a large animal, such as an elephant, than a mouse, because it involves a greater degree of effort and determination. It is debatable whether this principle applies in the case of abortion, although as Peter Harvey (2000) points out, a more developed fetus may feel more pain, and for that reason a late abortion may be worse.

Buddhist “Pro-choice” Considerations. So far we seem to have the makings of a clear “pro-life” position. However, things are not as simple as the doctrinal position suggests, and despite the condemnation of abortion, the case histories recorded in the Vinaya disclose that as medical practitioners, monks occasionally became illegally involved in procuring and performing abortions. Monks frequently acted as counselors to families and often were drawn in to the kinds of problems which arise in family life, such as an unwanted pregnancy. Sometimes monks brought their medical knowledge to bear in attempts to cause a miscarriage. The methods used included ointments, potions, and charms, pressing or crushing the womb, and scorching or heating it. It is also clear that despite being illegal abortion is widely practiced in Buddhist countries, and students need to understand that there is tension between theory and practice in this respect.

The contemporary legal position also varies from country to country. The more conservative Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia, such as Thailand and Sri Lanka, have laws prohibiting abortion, except when necessary to save the life of the mother. Nevertheless, illegal abortions are common. Somewhat surprisingly for a country in which Buddhism is so widely practiced, however, women in Thailand are 50 percent more likely to have an abortion than women in the United States. Married women, who appear to use it as a means of birth control, account for 85 percent or more of recorded abortions. One recent study refers to an estimated 300,000 abortions per year, the vast majority of which are illegal (Florida 1999). The Thai Penal Code of 1956 allows abortion in only two circumstances: (1) "if it is necessary for the sake of the woman's health" and (2) in cases of rape. Florida notes that opinion polls in Thailand also reveal an intriguing paradox: while most Thais regard abortion in principle as immoral, a majority also believes the legal grounds for obtaining it should be relaxed (1999).

In East Asian countries with large but not majority Buddhist populations, attitudes are more liberal. The rate of abortion in Japan has been very high in recent years, perhaps peaking at over a million (some would put the figure higher) before decreasing in recent years as the contraceptive pill has become more easily available. Central to the contemporary Japanese experience is the phenomenon of *mizuko kuyō*, a memorial service held for aborted children that will be discussed further below. Korea provides an interesting comparison with Japan. Both countries have a very high rate of abortion, but in Japan it is legal (since 1948); whereas, in Korea, it is not. Annual figures of between one and two million are quoted for Korea, a country with a population of around 46 million. Over a quarter of the population are Buddhists, which makes them the majority religious group. Statistics quoted by Tedesco (1999) reveal that Buddhists are slightly more likely to have abortions than other segments of the population. In 1985, an anti-abortion movement began to gain ground following the publication of a book by the Venerable Sok Myogak, a Buddhist monk of the Chogye order. His book, of which the title in English is *My Dear Baby, Please Forgive Me!* became popular, and readers began to demand rites and services for aborted children similar to the Japanese *mizuko kuyō* service, although distinctively Korean in form.

It is clear then, that despite the scriptural prohibitions, Buddhists have always resorted to abortion and continue to do so. These facts problematize the position and make us think that there may be aspects to the question that have been overlooked. So what might a Buddhist "pro-choice" position look like? Some Western Buddhists take a more liberal stance on the abortion question. James Hughes suggests that "clear and defensible distinctions can

be made between fetuses and other human life” (Hughes 1999) and finds the moral logic of utilitarianism persuasive in the context of abortion, although tempered by the requirements of a virtue ethic, which takes into account the mindset of the actors. Abortion may therefore be allowable where the intention is compassionate and the act achieves the best outcome for all concerned. Much philosophical discussion of abortion from feminist and “pro-choice” perspectives in the West has focused on the criteria of moral personhood and the point at which a fetus acquires the capacities which entitle it to moral respect. The philosophical foundations for this approach were laid by Locke and Kant, who argued that only rational beings are “persons” with a moral status. For them the paradigm moral subject is the rational adult in possession of all his or her intellectual faculties. Locke and Kant did not apply these conclusions to abortion, but contemporary philosophers have built on their views arguing that what we value about human beings is not life per se in the biological sense, but rather the various faculties and powers which human beings possess, such as reason, self-consciousness, autonomy, the capacity to form relationships, and similar abilities of this kind. When these faculties are present, they say, we can speak of a moral “person,” and when they are absent there is only biological life. On this reasoning, before it acquires these attributes a fetus is only a “potential person” rather than an actual one, and so does not have a claim to full moral status and the right to life that entails.

As an example of this approach, modern feminist writers such as Mary Anne Warren (1973) have identified five central features central to personhood—consciousness, reasoning, self-motivated activity, the capacity to communicate, and self-awareness. Warren claims that a fetus is no more conscious or rational than a fish, and that accordingly abortion is not immoral. A Buddhist pro-choice argument paralleling that based on the concept of personhood could be mounted by reference to the doctrine of the five aggregates (*skandhas*). These are the five factors that constitute the individual human being—namely, material form (*rūpa*), feelings and sensations (*vedanā*), perceptions (*saṃjñā*), volitions (*saṃskāra*), and consciousness (*vijñāna*). If it could be shown, for instance, that the aggregates were acquired gradually rather than all at once, it may be possible to argue that the life of an early fetus which possessed fewer of the five was less valuable than that of a more mature one, which possessed them all. An argument along these lines is developed by Michael Barnhart (1998). This argument faces the problem that the early commentarial tradition teaches that all five *skandhas* are present from the moment of rebirth (in other words from conception). Buddhaghosa, for instance, is very clear in stating that the human mind-body aggregate—known in Buddhist

teachings as *nāma-rūpa*—is complete in the very first moment of existence as a human being. However, Buddhaghosa's view could be challenged by reference to modern embryological research which appears to show that an early fetus lacks the capacity to feel pain because the central nervous system is not sufficiently developed. If there is no physiological capacity to experience feelings or sensations, it is difficult to understand what it means to say that the aggregate of *vedanā* is present.

A Scenario for Group Consideration. After explaining Buddhist embryology and outlining the available ethical perspectives, I find it useful to involve the group by presenting the following scenario for class discussion.

Mrs T is aged 35 and lives in a remote part of the Chiang Mai region of Northern Thailand. She is an agricultural worker with only a basic education. She does not use contraception due to the absence of any local family planning facilities. She is married with three children, and has just found out she is eight weeks pregnant. She and her husband barely earn enough to support their existing children, and a fourth child would place an unbearable economic strain on family resources.⁷

To explore this scenario I ask for three volunteers to engage in a role-playing exercise for the next class. One takes the part of Mrs. T., another of a Buddhist monk, and a third the unborn fetus. Each begins with a short statement describing the salient features of the situation from their point of view and what the implications for them would be of a decision to abort. Each one then addresses the other two briefly expressing their feelings with respect to the situation and suggesting ways to resolve the predicament. After this, the discussion is opened to the rest of the class for comment, with the opportunity to address questions to the three participants. Following this, the tutor can reveal one likely outcome as described below.

Mrs. T. attended one of the many illegal abortion clinics in Thailand and had a termination at 14 weeks. In Thailand, abortion is used as a method of birth control by married women due to the lack of family planning clinics and contraceptive advice, particularly in rural areas. As is usual, Mrs. T. did not discuss her plans with any member of the Buddhist clergy, since intimate family matters are not seen as appropriate matters of concern for celibate monks who have renounced worldly concerns. In having the abortion Mrs. T. felt she had done wrong and would incur bad karma as a result. However she believed she had no

alternative, and hoped to mitigate any negative karmic effects by performing good works and making offerings at the local temple.

The class is then invited to offer a moral assessment of the outcome in terms of their understanding of Buddhist ethical teachings and also to speculate on alternative outcomes. The discussion will often polarize fairly quickly around a pro-life/pro-choice axis, so it is useful to emphasize the distinctive Buddhist perspective on this question by posing a few general questions to the group. One of these could be “Does the Buddhist belief in rebirth change our moral perspective on the outcome in any way?” Obviously, in the Western and Christian understanding abortion ends the only existence a person can ever have; whereas, from the Buddhist perspective indefinite further opportunities will present themselves. Students can be asked whether in their view this makes abortion a less serious matter. Those who feel it does could then be asked whether they think the belief in rebirth also makes the killing of an infant, or an adult, less serious. A discussion around this point will encourage students to examine their beliefs about the moral difference between the fetal and other stages of human development.

Mizuko Kuyō. To conclude the topic of abortion, I introduce a distinctive aspect of Buddhist practice with which most students will not be familiar, namely the ritual of *mizuko kuyō*. I present this topic by informing students that in recent decades Japanese Buddhists have made what some regard as a constructive contribution to the dilemma posed by abortion. In Japan, in the absence of effective prevention, an efficient (and profitable) abortion industry has emerged to deal with the problem of unwanted pregnancies. Faced with the pain and anguish these situations create, Japanese society has evolved a unique solution: the *mizuko kuyō* memorial service for aborted children. Some (e.g., LaFleur 1992) see the ritual as having its roots in traditional Japanese culture, whereas others (e.g., Harrison 1999) attribute it more to social turmoil in the wake of World War II. The service involves erecting a small statue to commemorate the lost child and includes an apology to the spirit of the aborted fetus. Although only ever resorted to by a minority of women who had abortions or miscarriages, the ritual became extremely popular in the 1960s and 1970s, since which time its popularity has declined, at least in Japan. William LaFleur (1992) explored the complex symbolism and cultural history of the practice, and a feminist perspective has been provided by Helen Hardacre (1997).

An explanation of the concept of a *mizuko* and a description of the ritual needs to be provided. *Mizuko* literally means “water-child,” a concept which

has its origins in Japanese mythology, and “*kuyō*” means a ritual or ceremony. The *mizuko kuyō* service is generally a simple one in which a small figure of the bodhisattva Jizō represents the departed child. Jizō is a popular bodhisattva in Japan who is regarded as the protector of young children, and statues and shrines to him are found throughout the country. He is often shown dressed in the robes of a monk carrying a staff with six rings on it, which jingle like a child’s rattle. Following an abortion or miscarriage, a small image of Jizō (known as a *mizuko* Jizō) may be decorated with a child’s bib, and pinwheels and toys placed alongside. Traditionally the image would be placed in the home or at a small roadside shrine, but in recent years specialist temples such as the Hasedera temple in Kamakura have appeared which offer commemorative services with various degrees of sophistication. These temples are like memorial parks or cemeteries, with rows and rows of small statues each commemorating a terminated pregnancy or miscarriage. The *mizuko kuyō* ceremony performed in such temples can take many forms, but would typically involve the parents, and sometimes other members of the family, erecting an image of Jizō and paying their respects to it by bowing, lighting a candle, striking gongs, chanting verses or a hymn, and perhaps reciting a short Buddhist *sūtra* like the *Heart Sūtra*. It is also customary to provide a memorial tablet and a posthumous Buddhist name, which allows the deceased child to be recognized within the family structure. The rite may be repeated at intervals such as on the anniversary of the abortion. The public nature of the ceremonial simultaneously acknowledges the child that has been lost and helps those involved come to terms with the event on an emotional level. Women and their partners who have the ritual performed find it consoling, and it is clearly comforting to think that Jizō is protecting their lost offspring.

The ritual, however, is not without its critics. The majority of Buddhist organizations in Japan do not endorse *mizuko kuyō*, regarding it as a modern innovation based on questionable doctrinal interpretation, and lacking any basis in the *sūtras*. Two large Buddhist organizations, Jōdō Shinshū and Soka Gakkai, actively oppose the rite for this reason, pointing out that according to orthodox Buddhist teachings a ritual cannot wipe away the bad karma caused by an abortion. The more unscrupulous temples in Japan have also sometimes exploited the ritual commercially, promoting the idea of *tatari*, or retribution from departed spirits. The idea has been put about, often accompanied by lurid pictures that an aborted fetus becomes a vengeful spirit that causes problems for the mother unless placated by the ritual. Undoubtedly, many temples regard the new ritual simply as a money-making scheme and ruthlessly exploit vulnerable women.

Opposition on the part of the Jōdō Shinshū and others, however, has not taken a political form, and Japanese Buddhists have not campaigned to change the law on abortion or sought to influence the practice of the medical profession. Japan has not seen the kinds of attacks on abortion clinics and their personnel which have taken place in the United States. This approach is in line with the nonjudgmental stance which Buddhism traditionally adopts on moral issues. It recognizes that the pressures and complexities of life can sometimes cloud judgment and lead people to make wrong choices. The appropriate response in these cases, however, is thought to be compassion and understanding rather than vociferous condemnation. Buddhists who are sympathetic to this view and who support the notion of the woman's "right to choose" may recommend meditation and discussion with a Buddhist teacher as ways in which the woman can get in touch with her feelings and come to a decision in harmony with her conscience.

While some aspects of the *mizuko kuyō* ritual may seem alien, some in the West have begun to practice it; many see it as a possible way to help defuse the highly politicized debates over abortion in the United States. In his recent study of the ritual in America, Jeff Wilson mentions that his research turned up "more than one hundred published works in popular (nonacademic) venues by non-Buddhist Americans that discuss the Japanese practice of *mizuko kuyō*, most of them written in the 1990s and 2000s" (Wilson 2009: 131). Perhaps surprisingly, both pro-life and pro-choice groups have sought to appropriate the ritual. Wilson comments "perhaps there will be some surprise that both pro-life and pro-choice venues promote knowledge of *mizuko kuyō*, and pro-life Christians and pro-choice feminists are equally as likely to make reference to the ritual" (2009: 137). In the final analysis, whether Buddhism can offer a "middle way" on abortion depends largely on what one understands by a "middle way," a question I have addressed elsewhere (Keown 1999b). Also of relevance here is the "anti-abortion/pro-choice" position advocated by Helen Tworikov (1992) as a Buddhist compromise between the polarized positions familiar in the West.



Cross-Cultural Aspects of Bioethics

In addition to the consideration of substantive issues, the study of bioethics from a Buddhist perspective can make an important contribution to understanding others in the globalized world we inhabit today. This is because it inevitably raises wider questions about the status of transcultural moral norms, and a Buddhism ethics course can conclude with a discussion of this point. The issue is vast and still largely unresolved, but students can express

their views about the universal validity of the beliefs and values they have studied in the course. Students from ethnic minority backgrounds, in particular, may have interesting contributions to make to such a discussion.

S. R. Benatar, quoting terms used by Ninian Smart, argues that understanding ourselves and others requires “structured empathy” and a “cross-disciplinary” study of worldviews/belief systems. He writes: “As world views represent powerful and different starting points from which people think and argue (and generate conflict), it is necessary to understand how they are constructed, used, and abused” (Benatar 2008: 343). In a world made up of different value systems and cultures, it is important to consider whether there exist universal ethical principles that provide us with common ground, and if so, how these can be applied in specific contexts. Some argue that the world religions share a good deal of common ground, and that there already exists the foundations for a “global ethic” (Kung and Kuschel 1993). Pulling in the opposite direction are the relativists, who hold that moral values are determined entirely by local culture; and postmodernists skeptical about the possibility of consensus among competing moralities (Engelhardt 2006). Can a middle ground be found between these polarized alternatives? Benatar believes it can, and that there are two requirements for doing so. He writes:

First, it is necessary for scholars to acquire deeper insights into their own value systems and the value systems of others. Second, and of equal importance, is the need to avoid either uncritically accepting the moral perspectives of all cultures as equally valid or rejecting them all as invalid. Instead . . . moral reasoning should be used to evaluate when and how local considerations can be morally relevant in the application of universal principles in local contexts.

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Conclusion

In terms of the main pedagogic considerations, my recommendations for a course on Buddhist bioethics would be as follows:

- Limit the syllabus to a small number of topics familiar to members of the group. Make sure bibliographic resources are available for the topics chosen.
- Keep the focus on practice as opposed to theory.

- Use scenarios and role play to dramatize issues.
- Use a variety of assessment methods to measure different learning outcomes.
- Wherever possible, contrast Buddhist and Western perspectives in order to bring underlying cultural presuppositions to the surface.
- Conclude by raising wider questions of globalization, relativism, and ethical universalism.

An Annotated Bibliography on Buddhist Ethics and Bioethics

Preliminary Readings. For reading prior to the course, I recommend two of my own books from the Oxford University Press series of Very Short Introductions. The volume on *Buddhism* (Keown 2000) describes the basic doctrines and the historical development of Buddhism in Asia, while the volume on *Buddhist Ethics* (Keown 2005) applies Buddhist teachings to a range of contemporary issues, including issues in medical ethics like abortion and euthanasia. More detailed general introductions to Buddhism include Harvey (1990), Mitchell (2014), and Keown and Prebish (2009). Those coming from a medical background may find the chapter on Buddhism by Siroj Sorajjakul and Supaporn Naewbood in Sorajjakool et al. (2009) useful. A useful short introduction to medical ethics is Hope (2004), also from the Oxford series of Very Short Introductions. Students lacking a background in ethics may find it helpful to read a selection of the key articles on the topics in question. There are several good anthologies such as LaFollette (2006), Kuhse and Singer (2006), and White (2008). Any introductory textbook to applied ethics will also include a review of the arguments for and against issues like abortion, for example, Thiroux and Krasemann (2008).

Buddhist Bioethics. I know of only two monographs on this subject, namely Keown (1995) and Ratanakul (2004). Also, see my short chapter which provides an introduction to Buddhist bioethics in Peppin et al. (2004). There is a general bibliography on Buddhism and Bioethics online at the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*. This was compiled by myself and James J. Hughes in 1995 and is obviously now somewhat out of date, but may still be of some use (Hughes and Keown 1995). Shoyo Taniguchi's (1987) article summarizes her master's thesis on Buddhist bioethics and is available online, and a recent article by Michael Brannigan (2010) explores the influence of the no-self doctrine on North American bioethics.

Abortion. My bibliography *Buddhism and Abortion* in the Oxford Bibliography series (<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com>) provides the most comprehensive listing of resources currently available. Chapter 2 of my book *Buddhism and Bioethics* discusses the ethical issues in some depth, and my edited volume *Buddhism and Abortion* (Keown 1999a) considers a variety of Buddhist perspectives on abortion from a range of Asian countries. Harvey (2000) offers an excellent short overview of the subject in chapter 8. Elsewhere, abortion in Thailand receives a special focus by anthropologist Andrea Whittaker (2004). The classic work on *mizuko kuyō* is LaFleur (1992) along with his associated articles (see bibliography) and rejoinder to George Tanabe (LaFleur 1995). There is abundant periodical literature on this ritual such as Florida (1991), Smith (1992), Brooks (1981), and Eiki and Dosho (1987). The transmission of the ritual to North America has been the subject of a study by Wilson (2009), while Young (1989) offers some reflections from the Christian perspective. For a feminist Buddhist perspective, see Rita Gross (2010).

Cross-Cultural Ethics. A good introduction to the issues in transcultural medical ethics can be found in Pelligreno et al. (1992). For more recent reflections, see Coward and Ratanakul (1999) and for methodological questions, see the essays in Rehmann-Sutter et al. (2005). A thorough discussion of the possibility of universal medical ethics is available in Engelhardt (2006). Also useful is the online publication *A Cross Cultural Introduction to Bioethics*, edited by D. R. J. Macer and *Asia Pacific Perspectives on Medical Ethics*, both available online from the Eubios Ethics Institute (<http://www.eubios.info/ccib.htm>). For a nursing perspective, see Andrews and Boyle (2007), while Deepadung (1992) explores the interaction between traditional and Western medicine in Thailand.

Notes

1. Should I be mistaken in this claim (and I sincerely hope I am), I trust colleagues will be kind enough to enlighten me and send a copy of the syllabus so that I can pass this on to potential students who regularly email me to ask where they can study the subject.
2. Among these I include the work of Thai bioethicist Pinit Ratanakul. Also notable for its efforts in promoting Asian bioethics is the Eubios Ethics Institute in Bangkok. (<http://www.eubios.info/home>).
3. For a sample of current topics of interest, see the UNESCO publication *Asia Pacific Perspectives on Medical Ethics* (available online at <http://www.eubios.info/APPME.pdf>).

4. Robert E. Florida (1994) has discussed the merits of the “Four Principles” with specific reference to Buddhism, and for a more general critique of this methodology, see Schone-Seifert (2010).
5. In most Asian societies, age is calculated according to this moment, so that at birth, a human is one year old.
6. By “sanctity” is meant a person’s level of spiritual development. Buddhism recognizes various stages of development from being an ordinary person to a fully awakened Buddha.
7. This scenario was first used in my chapter “Buddhist bioethics” (Keown 2008).

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Buddhist Environmentalism

Leslie E. Sponsel and Poranee Natadecha-Sponsel

Introduction

There is no doubt among informed people that environmental problems are rampant from the local to the global, and of crisis proportion including climate change. Many deep thinkers, realizing that these problems reflect, at root, moral and spiritual crises, have turned in various ways to religion and/or spirituality as a last resort to solve the problems because the usual secular approaches have proven insufficient, even though necessary. While the world of the Buddha some twenty-five centuries ago was very different from today, there is no doubt that there are some elements of ecology and environmentalism in the Buddha's teachings and the actions of his followers over the centuries. The central preoccupation of the Buddha, and accordingly Buddhism, is with removing the causes of suffering and eliminating it. Environmental problems and crises contribute to suffering in numerous and diverse ways, indirectly as well as directly. In the teachings of the Buddha, "beings" refers to all living creatures, "seen and unseen." Therefore, ecological and environmental concerns are inherent in Buddhism. It is through these principles that Buddhist environmentalism has been developing, most markedly in the last couple of decades, in Asia as well as in the West. Buddhism is relevant to environmental problems and crises, just as it is to contemporary sociopolitical issues. Indeed, Buddhism would be long extinct if the multitude of its adherents did not continue to find it meaningful in many different contexts through the past two and a half millennia from Asia to the West.

In this chapter first we explore the principles in general, and then we pursue them in teaching in particular. We focus on the commonalities within

Buddhism, such as the Triple Refuge, rather than on any details of its manifestations in the three main traditions and their numerous variants as specific schools, lineages, or sects. Instead of the common approach of discussing Buddhist environmentalism through only interpreting the relevance of sacred texts, this chapter surveys the subject more broadly.



The Three Refuges and Environmentalism

Buddha. Elements of ecology and environmentalism can be detected in the various biographies about the life, teachings, and context of the Buddha, even though rarely is much said explicitly about these elements in the mixture of fact, legend, and myth (Ryan 1998: 63–76). Siddhattha Gotama was born under a Sal tree in a grove at Lumbini Park near Kapilavatsu in Nepal. As an adult, he engaged in a spiritual quest with various masters for six years, experimenting with asceticism, in forest groves. After he reached enlightenment under a large pipal (or “*bodhi*”) tree at Bodhgaya, the Buddha devoted a week to meditation beneath each of several different species of trees: Nigrodha or Indian fig, Mucalinda, and Rajayatana or Kingstead. Next he went to the royal Deer Park of Isipatana in Sarnath, just north of Benares (Kabilsingh 1998: 56). He knew that five spiritual seekers whom he had previously befriended lived there. In his very first discourse or sermon, the Buddha explained to these five spiritual seekers the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, the core of Buddhist doctrine. Throughout the remaining forty-five years of his life, the Buddha wandered over much of northern and eastern India as a spiritual teacher, often residing in forest retreats. He died at the age of eighty years while reclining between two Sal trees in a grove outside the small town of Kusinagara.

Another connection between the Buddha and nature is evidenced in the collection of 547 parables called the *jātakas*.¹ These are accounts of previous incarnations of the Buddha, many in the form of an animal that sacrifices its own life to save others; they illustrate core virtues like wisdom, nonviolence, compassion, loving-kindness, and generosity. They also demonstrate the interconnectedness and interdependence among beings. The *jātakas* imply that animals have a moral sense and the capacity to make ethical choices and behave accordingly. Familiarity from childhood with these legends has probably influenced many Buddhists to have positive attitudes toward animals by according them intrinsic value. They are readily accessible moral allegories that provide, in effect, many of the attributes of an eco-centric environmental ethic.²

It should also be mentioned that the environment in which the Buddha lived was changing as a result of increasing population and economic pressures; indeed, there were even environmental problems (Erdosy 1998; Thakur 2004; Gadgil and Guha 2013: 82, 87–90).

Dharma. Bodhi Bhikkhu most concisely encapsulates the relevance to nature of the teachings of the Buddha:

With its philosophical insight into the interconnectedness and thoroughgoing interdependence of all conditioned things, with its thesis that happiness is to be found through the restraint of desire in a life of contentment rather than through the proliferation of desire, with its goal of enlightenment through renunciation and contemplation and its ethic of non-injury and boundless loving-kindness for all beings, Buddhism provides all the essential elements for a relationship to the natural world characterized by respect, care, and compassion.

Bhikkhu 1987: vii

The Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path are elemental, central, and pivotal in the understanding and practice of Buddhism. The Four Noble Truths address the ubiquity, causes, and reduction of suffering. Ultimately, a Buddhist aims at ending one's own suffering by pursuing enlightenment in the present life and by avoiding the suffering inherent in the endless cycle of rebirths.³ In East Asia, Mahāyāna Buddhists may suspend their pursuit of enlightenment to help relieve the suffering of other beings and to promote their inherent potential to become a Buddha themselves, their Buddha-nature. Such altruistic persons are called *bodhisattvas*. Furthermore, in Mahāyāna all beings and all things are considered to possess the potential of Buddha-nature including trees and rocks (King 1991; Harvey 1998; LaFleur 2000).

The Noble Eightfold Path is the way to reduce suffering and pursue enlightenment. Each of its eight components is relevant to nature to the degree that it is correlated with extending nonviolence, compassion, and loving-kindness to all beings and things (Loori 1996; Roberts 2009: 1–4; Koizumi 2010). That this extension to all beings was intended by the Buddha is clear from the *Metta Sutta* and other discourses.⁴ As part of the Noble Eightfold Path, Right Livelihood, for example, includes occupations that do not harm life. However, it is impossible to live without causing some harm, as even vegetarians harm plants that they consume. A Buddhist can only strive to minimize harm as much as possible. Here the elemental distinction between need and greed is critical. By pursuing the Middle Way of the Noble Eightfold Path an individual

tries to satisfy as modestly as feasible the four basic needs that the Buddha recognized: food, medicine, clothing, and shelter. In so doing, one minimizes one's ecological footprint or environmental impact, including the inevitable waste and pollution that accompany resource consumption. This is voluntary simplicity for which monks and nuns are still role models.

If the first negative precept of nonviolence and the first positive precept of compassion and loving-kindness apply to all beings, then the environmental implications are immediately obvious and undeniable. There are elements resembling Western ecology in Buddhism, and the converse, although this is most likely sheer coincidence. Both Buddhism and ecology pursue a view of the world that recognizes interconnection, instead of one that dichotomizes either organism and environment or human and nature; both also consider all life, including humans, as subject to natural laws; doctrinal exponents follow a systems approach regarding the unity, interrelatedness, and interdependence of the components of nature; and both advocate respect and even reverence for nature (Barash 2014; Murphy 2014). While these similar elements may be merely parallels rather than identities, today we can see their complementarity and the potential for mutual reinforcement in both theory and practice for Buddhists.

Sangha. The monastic community of monks and nuns (*sangha*) ideally resembles a sustainable, green, just, and peaceful society, albeit with hierarchy based on time “in the robes” and gender. The *sangha* is a small-scale community grounded in nonviolence, moderation, cooperation, and reciprocity in satisfying basic material needs. Ideally, these monastics hold a mirror up to society on a daily basis with their lived values, vow of poverty, and simple lifestyle, among other attributes. The exemplars have pursued their own spiritual development rather than materialism and consumerism. As highly respected and even revered members of society, they have extraordinary sociocultural status, prestige, and power to take the lead in transforming Buddhist societies into far more ecologically attuned polities, drawing on the ecological wisdom in the Buddha's life and the Dharma (Sponsel and Natadecha-Sponsel 1997).

Many of the more than two hundred prescriptions and proscriptions for monastics in the monastic code (*Vinaya*) are ecologically relevant (Bhikkhu 1994). The goal of several of the rules is to prevent monks from knowingly harming any living being; monastics can only consume fruit without seeds, or if a lay person has already damaged it. It is an offense for a monastic to purposefully cut, burn, or kill any living plant. Harming any animal is also proscribed, even small animals like ants, although harming large animals is far more serious. One could even be expelled from the *sangha* by injuring or

killing an organism like a worm through digging in the ground. Monastics are prohibited from polluting water in any way and should strain or at least check the water that they use for drinking and other purposes to avoid knowingly harming any visible organisms in it.

Vegetarianism is an option for members of the sangha as for lay Buddhists. The Buddha explicitly refused to prohibit monks from eating meat, mainly because they depend on alms food from local householders. Vegetarianism is one way that all Buddhists can reduce harm and offer compassion to other beings as well as provide an example and elevate awareness for others. It also reduces one's ecological footprint.⁵

Many temple complexes can be viewed as protected ecosystems with groves of trees and with special species of the *bodhi* and banyan as well as their associated fauna. Householders like members of the sangha are prohibited from disturbing plants, animals, and other natural phenomena in and near a temple complex. For example, Suan Mokkh, a monastery established in 1932 by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu near Surat Thani in southern Thailand, covers 120 acres of forest, forming a refuge of biodiversity surrounded by a sea of rice paddies and rubber tree plantations. But even smaller sacred sites can be ecologically significant if it is recognized that the bulk of biodiversity is composed of invertebrates, which are the most significant organisms in ecosystem processes like energy flow and nutrient cycling (Sponsel et al. 1998).

Since the era of the Buddha, many monks and nuns have devoted much of their time to living and meditating in forests, mountains, and caves, often in solitude.⁶ In recent times many forest monks have become environmental activists in Cambodia, Thailand, and elsewhere. They consider deforestation to be sacrilegious and a threat to the forest monk tradition, since the forest is their sacred habitat. In addition, out of compassion for the suffering that humans and other beings experience as a result of deforestation, some monks have initiated environmental education programs, sustainable economic development projects, and rituals to protect remaining forests and other aspects of the environment in Buddhist and other countries.⁷

The current activism should not lead to the conclusion that Buddhist environmentalism is necessarily always a recent development. For instance, as early as 1642 the Great 5th Dalai Lama of Tibet issued a "Decree for the Protection of Animals and the Environment." Since that year, each Dalai Lama has proclaimed an annual "Decree for the Protection of Animals and the Environment" regarding wild and domestic animals. These decrees were dispatched to local leaders, observers were sent to monitor compliance, and local leaders sent reports back to top officials. Middle and lower level government officials issued periodic regulations as well. The first Westerners to enter Tibet

were most impressed by the abundance of wildlife. The environment in Tibet appears to have been quite healthy until just a few decades ago when a significant decline coincided with the Chinese occupation of the formerly independent sovereign nation of Tibet. Nevertheless, Tibetan Buddhists, including those in the diaspora, have implemented significant environmental initiatives as have others in neighboring countries.⁸



Householders and the Environment

Since ancient times many Buddhists have gone on pilgrimages to sacred sites associated with the life of the Buddha and other Buddhist personages as well as to temples, shrines, and other sacred places, many in mountains or forests. For instance, in Tibet, Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar at its base are sacred to the Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, and Tibetan Bon religions (Thurman and Wise 2000; McKay 2006; Duerr 2010). Many of the sacred places associated with Buddhism require certain prescriptions and proscriptions like not harming any beings, thus some function as sanctuaries of nature.

Buddhists can accumulate merit through planting trees, particularly in and around temple yards. Sometimes in Thailand tree seedlings are offered to persons attending a funeral who wish to plant them to gain merit for the deceased and themselves; family members likewise may earn merit by rescuing living beings from slaughter. Planting trees reminds people of the Buddha's life and teachings, including the interdependent relationships between humans and nature.⁹

Socially engaged Buddhism exposes the common but mistaken impression that Buddhism is necessarily a detached, escapist, and egocentric religion. It involves following the example and teachings of the Buddha through the active application of compassion, loving-kindness, and other principles to benefit other beings. Among the various concerns often associated with engaged Buddhists are appropriate technology such as organic farming and recycling, sustainable and just economic development, and environmentalism. The prominent Thai Buddhist activist, Sulak Sivaraksa, founder of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, supports environmental activism. One of his recent books, *The Wisdom of Sustainability: Buddhist Economics for the 21st Century*, further develops the basic ideas of E. F. Schumacher's groundbreaking book applying Buddhist thinking to the development of sustainable economics in the face of globalization.¹⁰



Buddhism in the West

At least by the mid-nineteenth century, Buddhism was spreading beyond Asia into Europe and North America. One of the icons of Western environmentalism, Henry David Thoreau, was a student of Asian philosophy and religion. In 1844, he published in *The Dial*, a Transcendentalist periodical, a translation from French of a portion of the *Lotus Sutra* (Mueller 1977: 1–2; Piez 1992: 82). From about this time, this and other texts in English translation, as well as visiting Asian Buddhists through lectures, influenced the West in a multitude of diverse ways. For instance, in recent decades His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet has been the most influential Asian Buddhist through his world travels, talks, and numerous books. In 1990, Steven C. Rockefeller, a student of Buddhism and a professor of religion at Middlebury College, brought the Dalai Lama as the most prominent participant to the groundbreaking symposium that he organized there on “Spirituality and Nature.” Furthermore, Rockefeller chaired the Earth Charter international drafting committee from 1997 to 2000 that produced the statement of a universal environmental ethic.¹¹

Yet a specific Buddhist environmentalism arose as early as the 1970s, perhaps stimulated by the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970 (Bloom 1972; Barash 1973). Western Buddhists have been keenly interested in exploring and applying the relevance of Buddhism for nature and the environment for about a century, though it has grown exponentially since the 1990s (Kraft 1994; Kaza 2000).

Ultimately, what is needed to promote the survival and welfare of the human species is a profound transformation to more sustainable and greener lifestyles and societies including radical simplicity. For example, some Buddhists have critically examined the growth-mania associated with materialism and consumerism together with alternatives for reducing the ecological footprint of individuals and societies. As Timmerman (1992: 74) asks: “How can we survive on a planet of ten billion points of infinite greed?” An entire country, Buddhist Bhutan, has tried to focus on environmental conservation in subordinating the growth in its Gross National Product to increasing Gross National Happiness (Badiner 2002; Kaza 2005a; Payne 2010).

One of the most prominent of the American engaged Buddhists is Joanna Macy. Her publications, website, and workshops provide specific measures to generate a meaningful reconnection with nature and consequent empowerment for activism. The training experience changes despair about social and ecological crises into creative and collaborative activism as part of the Great Turning.¹²

Regarding the issue of global climate change, the only questions are how bad will it get, how rapidly, and what if any measures can be taken for mitigation and adaptation? John Stanley, David R. Loy, and Gyurme Dorje co-edited the remarkable book *A Buddhist Response to the Climate Emergency*, which incorporates chapters written by prominent Asian and Western Buddhists from all of the major traditions. Furthermore, the editors developed an accompanying website that includes a Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change.¹³ Many of the Western pioneers and leaders in environmentalism were influenced by Buddhism.¹⁴

Contemporary Buddhist environmentalism and Deep Ecology resonate with one another in numerous and diverse ways.¹⁵ In particular, for Westerners, Buddhists and some others, Buddhism provides new perspectives, rationales, insights, values, and methods for dealing with environmental questions, problems, issues, and controversies. Today there are more than a thousand Buddhist centers in America, most with extensive mailing lists and websites. Often they practice conserving resources, recycling, and reducing waste and pollution. Voluntary simplicity is both a Buddhist and environmental virtue. Vegetarianism is often pursued using organically grown foods.¹⁶



Problems in Teaching Buddhism and Ecology

Considerations regarding the relevance of Buddhism to nature and environmentalism have elicited some criticisms which mainly pivot (1) on the issues of actual behavior in comparisons to ideals and (2) on the academic interpretations of texts. The actual behavior of many Buddhists is far too often not environmentally friendly. This paradox is clear from the widespread natural resource depletion and environmental degradation in most countries that are predominantly Buddhist.¹⁷ In any case, the discrepancy between the ideal and actual does not invalidate the premise that in principle Buddhism can be environmentally friendly. Buddhism and Buddhists should not be confused; the deficiency is not in the Dharma, but in Buddhists who are mere humans.

The second major discrepancy involves differences between text and context. This refers to the purely academic understanding of Buddhism, especially through the interpretation of the texts, in comparison to the actual understanding and daily practice by Buddhists of Buddhism as a lived-religion. For example, Ian Harris has been the most vocal critic with a succession of various articles in the free online *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* among other venues. In

contrast, Seth Devere Clippard argues that Buddhist environmental ethics is better located in Buddhist practice than in texts.¹⁸

It is also important to emphasize that there are monks who are both Buddhist scholars and practicing Buddhists. In this regard, the most notable personages are Buddhadasa Bhikkhu from Thailand, the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh from Vietnam, and His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, all three of whom, among many others, regard Buddhism as having significant ecological and environmental relevance. Each represents one of the three main traditions of Buddhism, Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna, respectively. A Google search of “Buddhism and ecology” by now will identify over a million sites.



Buddhist Views on the Human Future

The Buddha repeatedly said that ultimately he taught only about the cause and the end of suffering. In contemporary terms, it seems inevitable that suffering will increase in future decades because of the pressures of human population and economic growth; due to the failure to distinguish between needs and wants; and by citizens accepting the assumption of industrial society and capitalist economies that unlimited material growth and economic “development” are possible in spite of the earth’s finite resource base. As a consequence, competition, inequality, conflict, violence, and warfare will only intensify in the future and generate more suffering. Therefore, Buddhism will likely become even more relevant than ever before. Buddhists will have to increasingly apply critical and even radical thinking in examining contemporary problems and issues.



Notes on Teaching Buddhism and Ecology

Instructors are faced with both possibilities and challenges in introducing environmentalism to their courses on Buddhism. By 2015, there is an abundance of published resources now available in this field; and there is the perennial issue of designing courses for the diversity of student backgrounds and interests, and then engaging student interest and even participation.

Here preference is given to a course providing a broad overview or survey of the subject in general and then exploring in depth a few of the more important issues. However, it would be quite feasible to focus an entire

course more narrowly on specific topics, such as Buddhist economics, animal rights and vegetarianism, Buddhist environmental ethics, Tibetan Buddhist environmentalism, a comparison of Buddhist ecology and deep ecology, or Gary Snyder as Zen eco-poet and environmentalist. A whole seminar, or at least a large portion of a course, could also be focused on the literature for and against the relevance of Buddhism for environmentalism using the open access online *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*. The website EcoBuddhism focuses on global climate change, but encompasses much more on Buddhist environmentalism. Ideally, if institutional and other constraints allowed, it would be desirable to offer a general survey course followed by an advanced course, the latter focusing on different narrow topics in successive offerings.

While, as indicated in the sample syllabus in Appendix I, several books are very useful as texts, another possibility, in addition or instead, is to compile a set of articles drawn entirely from popular magazines like *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (e.g., Winter 1993) and *The Turning Wheel: The Journal of Socially Engaged Buddhism* of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (e.g., Spring 1994).

Because students have diverse background and interests, a course must provide general background as a common denominator for understanding subsequent material. This may be accomplished through a succession of introductory lectures and associated readings; this might be done in addition to having students read in advance of the course concise books for background such as on the Buddha, Buddhism, Buddhist ethics, and environmentalism.¹⁹

It is a challenge to attract and actively engage students in the course material throughout the entire term. Variety in course formats helps, including documentary films. However, few films deal directly with Buddhist environmentalism. Extraordinary examples are also useful to engage students, such as *Wat Lan Kuad* (2010), a monastery built with over 1.5 million recycled beer bottles. (The latter and other selected films are listed in Appendix II.)

Several additional means of attracting and engaging students include involving them in facilitating classes with individual presentations and research projects; personal experiential learning as required or optional activities; inviting guests with special expertise; and organizing group field trips. For instance, guests with special expertise like flower arrangement, calligraphy, bonsai trees, or other forms of Buddhist spiritual art and meditation might be invited into the class to perform.

Students enjoy working in groups. For instance, key issues like global climate change can be covered through a student panel with each individual summarizing and discussing a different chapter of the same book (e.g., *A Buddhist Response to the Climate Emergency*) and each panelist

covering a separate topic using different books (e.g., on vegetarianism or consumerism). Teams might debate the pros and cons of some issue, such as the cases for and against the relevance of Buddhism to environmental concerns. Groups could summarize and discuss different statements concerning the environment made by Buddhists. The class as a whole, or a subgroup of especially interested students, might take a field trip to a local Buddhist center to interview a teacher on their environmental concerns and activities.

Throughout the term, individual students can give brief reports on different key personages in Buddhist environmentalism. Individuals might also be invited to search the Internet for especially relevant websites and likewise YouTube for videos, then recommend them to the class or show and discuss them in class. The Alliance of Religions and Conservation, EcoBuddhism, and the Forum on Religion and Ecology are among the websites with a wealth of information on Buddhist environmentalism.

Experiential learning can involve such activities as sitting and/or walking meditation in nature, Zen bird watching, or calculating one's ecological footprint and speculating on distinctly Buddhist ways to reduce it. The best way for students to experience the interconnection between Buddhism and nature is through the simple exercise of mindful breathing to demonstrate the source of one's life and that of other beings. With this exercise the important Buddhist concepts of compassion and loving-kindness can be appreciated. Also, individuals can be required, or invited for extra credit, to maintain an academic diary or journal regularly writing one-page reactions to their experiences with class material.

Sid Brown offers a wealth of information and suggestions for teaching in her book *A Buddhist in the Classroom*. Duncan Ryuken Williams and Richard K. Payne have each compiled most useful annotated bibliographies on Buddhism and ecology with many websites offering a wealth of information. The BuddhaNet of the Buddha Dharma Educational Association, Inc., and Access to Insight are among the best.



Conclusion

In the future, the primary task for Buddhists, as well as for those non-Buddhists who just have an intellectual interest in Buddhism, including our students, is to explore more deeply and widely the relevance of Buddhism for defining a

healthy human connection to the environment, and seeking to create a sustainable economy. Buddhists can strive to apply their doctrinal resources, and modify their practices, to apply the Dharma as faithfully as possible in their interactions with their local environment and nature in general.²⁰ Students studying Buddhism in our classes can more fully understand this tradition by seeing the vital connections modern adherents are making between the teachings and the environmental crisis.²¹

Notes

1. Cowell 1895–1905; Story 1964; Jacobsen 2005: 1:903–905; ; Shaw 2006: 73–78; Jones 2007; Sahni 2008: 144–163.
2. Devall 1990: 155–164; Chapple 1996, 1997: 131–148; Phelps 2004.
3. On ecological aspects of suffering, see Kaza 2008: 3–32; Bhikkhuni 2010: 111–124.
4. Kjolhede 1994: 58; LaFleur 2000; James 2003; Werner 2004; Bhikkhu 2006.
5. Kapleau 1982; Page 1999; Steele and Kaza 2000; Phelps 2004; Shabkar 2004; Kaza 2005b: 385–411; Bodhipaksa 2010; Buddhist Resources on Vegetarianism and Animal Welfare, 2011, <http://online.sfsu.edu/~rone/Buddhism/BuddhismAnimalsVegetarian>.
6. See <http://www.awakeinthewild.com>; Mackenzie 1998; Tiyanich 2003; Sponsel and Natadecha-Sponsel 2004; Coleman 2006.
7. Kabilsingh 1987; Kaza 1997; Yamauchi 1997; Darlington 1998, 2003; Nanthakun 1998; Udomittipong 2000; Fung 2011; Visalo 2011.
8. For Tibet, see Atisha 1991; Cantwell 2001; Clark 2001; Huber 1991, 2003; Keyser 1990–1991. Also, see these websites: International Society for Ecology and Culture 2011, <http://www.isec.org.uk>; Karmapa 2011, “Karmapa’s Enlightened Activity,” Bangchen, Himalaya <http://www.khoryug.com/blog/>; Tesi Environmental Awareness Movement, 2011, <http://www.ecotibet.org>; Tibet, 2011, <http://www.tibet.com/>; Tibet Environmental Watch, 2011, <http://tew.org>; Trin-Gyi-Pho-Nya, Trin-Gyi-Pho-Nya: Tibet’s Environment and Development News Digest, 2011 (bi-monthly e journal) <http://www.tibetjustice.org/tringyiphonya/>. For Bhutan, see Seeland 1998; for Ladakh, see these publications by Norberg-Hodge 1991, 2001, 2005; for Mongolia, see Chimedsegee et al. 2009.
9. Trees for Tibet, 2011, <http://treesfortibet.blogspot.com/>.
10. Schumacher 1973; Swearer 1996; Zsolnai and Ims 2006; Sivaraksa 2009; Inoue 2010. For other environmental projects in engaged Buddhism in Asia, see Davies 1987; Kabilsingh 1987, 1998; Buddhist Institute 1999; Mahachulalongkorn University 2010; Williams 2010.

11. Rockefeller and Elder 1992; Morgante 1997; Rockefeller 1997; The Earth Charter Initiative, 2011, <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/>.
12. See Macy's (1991, 2000) books; and Macy with Brown 1998.
13. Stanley, Loy, and Dorje 2009; EcoBuddhism, "Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change," 2011, http://www.ecobuddhism.org/bcp/all_content/buddhist_declaration/; "Climate Change and Buddhism," Hout Bay, South Africa: Hout Bay Theravada Centre, 2011, <http://www.theravada.org.za/environment.asp>.
14. See Seed 1989; Shainberg 1993; Snyder 1994, 1996; Kraft 1997; Zaleski 1999; Taylor 2005; Barnhill 2010.
15. Aitken 1985; Curtin 1994; James 2000; Barnhill 2001; Henning 2002a, b; Gregory and Sabra 2008.
16. Such practices can be observed at Bodhi Tree Forest Monastery, Tullera, Australia; Earth Sangha in Washington, DC; the Eco-Dharma Centre, Catalunya, Spain; EcoSangha in Seattle, WA; Green Gulch Farm in Sausalito, CA; Zen Mountain Center near Mountain Center, CA; and Zen Mountain Monastery at Mt. Tremper, New York, including its Zen Environmental Studies Institute; among many other environmentally friendly Buddhist centers. See Yamauchi 1996, 1997; Kaza 1997; Fung 2011. Also, see the formal statements of the "Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change," 2011, http://www.ecobuddhism.org/bcp/all_content/buddhist_declaration/; Fossey, Ghosananda, and Venerable Nhem Kim Teng 2003; and by the Venerable Lungrig Namgyal Rinpoche 1986: 3–7.
17. However, it appears that, for the most part, Bhutan and Ladakh are lingering exceptions to this generalization. The discrepancies between the ideal and actual are noted by Tuan 1968. On Ladakh, see publications of Helena Norberg-Hodge mentioned in n. 8, and likewise with Seeland on Bhutan.
18. See these articles by Ian Harris 1991, 1994, 1995, 1997. For rebuttals of Harris's position, see Clippard 2011; Cooper and James 2005: 138–144; and Swearer 1997. Another skeptic is Schmithausen 1997.
19. The Oxford University Press series "Very Short Introductions" is especially useful. Sangharakshita has written a succession of separate books on various components and aspects of Buddhism with Windhorse Publications that can provide very informative detailed background on particular topics for instructors and students.
20. This chapter provides a representative sample of some of the more relevant literature and other resources, but is far from exhaustive. There are at least two dozen monographs and anthologies on Buddhist environmentalism and many times more publications in the form of chapters in other books and articles in academic journals and popular magazines. Even more material is on the internet. Indeed, with care student reading assignments could be drawn exclusively from the internet. The great wealth of material available necessitates much selectivity in developing and focusing course materials.

21. Brown 2008; also see Kaza 1998. For annotated bibliographies, see Richard Payne, "Buddhism and the Environment," in *Oxford Bibliographies Online*, 2011, <http://oxfordbibliographiesonline.com>; and Duncan Ryuken Williams, "Buddhism and Ecology Bibliography," Yale University Forum on Religion and Ecology, 2011, <http://fore.research.yale.edu/religion/buddhism.pdf>.

Appendix I Sample Syllabus: Buddhist Ecology and Environmentalism

Orientation

Buddhist thought and practice have been applied to practical problems and issues of society and daily life for more than 2,500 years in a multitude of diverse contexts and situations to meet the challenges of individual and societal concerns. Since the 1970s, and especially during the 1990s and beyond, increasing attention by Buddhists has been afforded to environmental matters, and most recently to global climate change. The core principles of Buddhism in the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path remain the common denominators underlying the various schools, lineages, and sects of Buddhism today. They are also the foundation of Buddhist environmentalism. This course provides a broad survey of Buddhist environmentalism in theory and practice as well as exploring more deeply into selected aspects to demonstrate the contributions that Buddhism can make to environmental concerns for non-Buddhists as well as Buddhists.

Objectives

The primary objectives of this course are to provide a:

1. systematic and holistic survey of Buddhist environmentalism;
2. demonstration of the relevance of Buddhism for particular environmental problems and issues;
3. illustration of the above through descriptions of key personages in Buddhist environmentalism; and
4. guide to resources for further individual study of these and related topics during this course and beyond.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course students should be able to:

1. identify the generic core principles of Buddhism most relevant to environmentalism;
2. describe the basic Buddhist worldview, values, and attitudes most relevant to environmentalism;
3. analyze specific environmental problems and issues as well as recommend appropriate action from a Buddhist perspective;
4. explain how Buddhist environmentalism might be manifest in daily life and society;

5. refute the criticisms of the skeptics regarding the relevance of Buddhism for environmentalism.

Format

The above topics will be covered in a variety of venues through a combination of lectures by the instructor, most with PowerPoint; general class and group discussion; student class presentations and exercises; and websites and films. When available some guests may be invited as special resource persons.

Required Textbooks

Every student is required to thoroughly read and discuss each of these basic textbooks following the assignments in the schedule below:

Thich Nhat Hanh, 2008, *The World We Have: A Buddhist Approach to Peace and Ecology*, Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.

Stephanie Kaza, 2008, *Mindfully Green: A Personal and Spiritual Guide to Whole Earth Thinking*, Boston: Shambhala.

Stephanie Kaza, and Kenneth Kraft, eds., 2000, *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*, Boston: Shambhala.

Roberts, Rosemary, 2009, *What Would the Buddha Recycle: The Zen of Green Living*. Avon, MA: Adams Media.

A few additional readings will be assigned from selected book chapters, journal articles, handouts, and online sources. In addition, each student is expected to present a critical summary of one book on a special environmental issue as listed in the schedule.

Graduate students are also required to read and discuss this book:

Mary Evelyn Tucker, and Duncan Ryuken Williams, eds., 1997, *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Schedule and Topics

PART I: BACKGROUND (lectures)

General background of nature, ecology, environmentalism, and ecocrises from the local to the global levels in historical perspective

General context of spiritual ecology—religious environmentalism as an academic and sociopolitical movement

Overview of Buddhist worldview, principles, values, attitudes, and practices

Comparison and critical analysis of formal statements by Buddhists on the environment

The case for Buddhist environmentalism: the natural wisdom of the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, and Laity, East and West

The case against Buddhist environmentalism: rebutting the arguments and evidence of the critics and skeptics

Buddhist environmentalism compared to Deep Ecology

PART II: TEXTS (student presentations summarizing and discussing required textbook)

Class, group, and individual discussion of each of the textbooks in succession: Nhat Hanh, Kaza, Kaza and Kraft, Roberts, Tucker and Williams

PART III: ISSUES (student facilitation)

Student panels summarizing and discussing books on key issues including animal rights and vegetarianism; materialism, consumerism, and sustainability; nuclear weapons, power plants, and waste disposal; and global climate change

PART IV: RESEARCH PROJECTS (student reports on library or fieldwork projects)

PART V: CONCLUSIONS (lecture and class discussion)

The actual and potential contributions as well as limitations of Buddhist environmentalism in coping with present and future environmental problems and crises at the individual and societal levels

Appendix II Documentary Films for Teaching Buddhist Environmentalism

- Alan Watts, 1968, *Buddhism: Man and Nature*, Westport, CT, Hartley Film Foundation (14 minutes).
- Bill Moyers, 1991, *Spirit & Nature*, New York, NY, Mystic Fire Video/PBS (88 minutes.).
- Ron Saunders and Leo Eaton, 1993, *Mini-Dragons II: Thailand*, New York, NY, Ambrose Video Publishing, Inc. (60 minutes).
- John Diado Loori, 2000, *Mountains and Rivers: Mystical Realism of Zen Master Dogen*, Mount Tremper, NY, Dharma Communications (VHS, 45 minutes).
- Lama Surya Das, 2000, *Natural Meditation*, Boulder, CO, Sounds True (VHS, 34 minutes).
- Nguyen Ann-Huong and Thich Nhat Hanh, 2006, *Walking Meditation*, Boulder, CO, Sounds True, Inc. (DVD, 34 minutes).
- Tom Vendetti, 2006, *Sacred Tibet: The Path to Mount Kailas*, Maui, HI, Vendetti Productions, LLC (DVD, 102 minutes).
- Joanna Macy, 2006, *The Work That Reconnects*, Gabriola Island, British Columbia, Canada (DVD, 4 hours and 21 minutes).
- Renewal, 2007, *Compassion in Action*, segment of *Renewal: Stories from America's Religious-Environmental Movement*, Cambridge, MA, Fine Cut Productions (DVD, segment on Buddhism 11 minutes).
- Tom Vendetti, 2007, *Bhutan: Taking the Middle Path to Happiness*, Maui, HI, Vendetti Productions, LLC (DVD, 55 minutes).
- Edward A. Burger, 2007, *Amongst White Clouds: Buddhist Hermit Masters of China's Zhongnan Mountains*, Oakland, CA, Festival Media/International Buddhist Film Festival (DVD, 86 minutes).
- Tongphanna, 2008, *Monks and Community Forestry*, [http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=communiy+forestry%2C+buddhism+and+cambodian+he ritage](http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=communiy+forestry%2C+buddhism+and+cambodian+he+ritage) (Parts 1–4, 18 minutes).
- Brook Ziporyn, 2008, *Buddhist and Ecology*, <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-880945489573313589#> (61 minutes).
- Severson, Lucky, 2010 (January 15), *Forest Monks*, Arlington, VA, PBS Religion & Ethics News Weekly, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/episodes/january-15-2010/forest-monks/5472/> (8 minutes).
- Paul Ebenkamp, 2010, *The Etiquette of Freedom: Gary Snyder, Jim Harrison, and the Practice of the Wild*, Berkeley, CA, Counterpoint (DVD, 90 minutes).
- David Grubin, 2010, *The Buddha: The Story of Siddhartha*, New York, NY, David Grubin Productions/PBS (DVD, 120 minutes).
- Titubarua, 2010, *Buddhism and Ecology*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Na3tFKacWYg> (13 minutes).

- Temple of Recycled Beer Bottles* (Wat Lan Kuad at Khun Han in Sisaket Province, northeastern Thailand) Beer Bottle Temple in Thailand YouTube, April 19, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYAEIPEz6MQ> (3 minutes).
- Vajragupta, 2011, *We Live in a Beautiful World: Buddhism and Nature*, Manchester, UK, Manchester Buddhist Centre, <http://www.videosangha.net/video/We-Live-in-a-Beautiful-World-Bu> (43 minutes).
- Wendy Lee, 2012, *Pad Yatra: A Green Odyssey*, <http://padyatrafilm> (DVD, 72 minutes).

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Buddhism and Economic Development

Laszlo Zsolnai

Introduction

Buddhist Economics is not the same as the study of economics of traditional Buddhism. The former is a modern discourse that utilizes elements of Buddhist thought to construct an alternative model of the economy; the latter is a study of how Buddhists have organized their economic lives in real-world social settings, from the ancient past until the present. Buddhist Economics is essentially a normative enterprise, adopting doctrines and practices from the wider tradition to construct an alternative utopian vision of the human future.

The discourse of Buddhist Economics is not synonymous with traditional Buddhist thought, interpretation, or practice. It is a construct developed by Western economists and Buddhist thinkers inspired by Buddhist ethics and the Buddhist monastic ideal. It represents an alternative approach to economic life, which is radically different from what mainstream Western economics offer. Buddhist Economics promotes want negation and selfless service for achieving happiness, peace, and permanence. These ideas might seem irrational or at least naïve for those committed to the Western economic mindset that is preoccupied with cultivating desires and maximizing profit or utility. However, the deep ecological and financial crisis of our era renders alternative solutions worthy of consideration.

Perhaps the best way to introduce Buddhist Economics is to contrast it with mainstream Western economics. A good place to start is to summarize the Western economic mindset that is characterized by basic principles such as (1) profit-maximization, (2) the cultivation of desire, (3) the introduction of markets, (4) instrumental use of the world, and (5) self-interest-based ethics.

Modern Western economics promotes doing economic activities in self-interested, profit-maximizing ways. It cultivates desires. People are encouraged to develop new desires for things to acquire and for activities to do. The profit motive of companies requires creating more and more demand. Modern Western economics aims to introduce markets wherever social problems need solving. In modern Western economics, the value of an entity (be it a human being, another sentient being, an object, or anything else) is determined by its marginal contribution to the production output. An economic project is considered worthy of undertaking if and only if its discounted cash flow is positive. This instrumental view of the world is a prime example of the calculating thinking of Western economics. There is only a limited place for ethics in modern Western economics. The Western economic man is allowed to consider the interest of others only if it serves his or her own interest at least in the long term (Zsolnai 2007).

Buddhist Economics challenges the basic principles of modern Western economics and proposes alternative principles such as (1) minimizing suffering, (2) simplifying desires, (3) nonviolence, (4) genuine care, and (5) generosity. The underlying principle of Buddhist Economics is to minimize suffering of all sentient beings concerned, including nonhuman beings. From a Buddhist viewpoint, a project is worthy to be undertaken if it reduces the suffering of those who are affected. The suffering-minimizing principle can be formulated to reveal that the goal of economic activities is not to produce gains but to decrease losses. Since humans (and other sentient beings) display loss sensitivity (Tversky and Kahneman 1991, 1992), it is worthy to reduce losses for oneself and for others rather than trying to increase gains for them. Losses should not be interpreted only in monetary terms or applied only to humans. The capability of experiencing losses (i.e., suffering) is universal in the realm of both human and nonhuman kingdoms.

Buddhist Economics suggests not to multiply but to simplify human desires. Above the minimum material comfort, which includes enough food, clothing, shelter, and medicine, it is wise to reduce one's desires. Wanting less could bring substantial benefits for the person, for the community, and for nature as a whole. Buddhism recommends moderate consumption and directly aims at changing one's preferences through meditation, reflection, analyses, autosuggestion, and the like.

Nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*) is the main guiding value of Buddhist Economics for solving social problems. It is required that an act does not cause harm to the doer or the receivers. Nonviolence prevents doing actions that directly cause suffering for oneself or others and urges participative and communicative solutions. The community-economy models are good examples. Communities

of producers and consumers are formed to meet both their needs at the lowest cost and reduced risk by a long-term arrangement. Community economy uses local resources to meet the needs of local people rather than the wants of markets far away. Community economy is based on partial or complete self-reliance (Douthwaite 1996).

Buddhist Economics favors practicing genuine care. Robert Frank developed five distinct types of cases when socially responsible organizations are rewarded for the higher cost of caring.

- (1) Opportunistic behavior can be avoided between owners and managers.
- (2) Getting moral satisfaction, employees are ready to work more for lower salaries.
- (3) High-quality new employees can be recruited.
- (4) Customers' loyalty can be gained.
- (5) The trust of subcontractors can be established. (Frank 2004)

Caring organizations are rewarded for the higher costs of their socially responsible behavior by their ability to form commitments among owners, managers, and employees and to establish trust relationships with customers and subcontractors.

Buddhist Economics suggests that generosity might work in business and social life because people behave like "*Homo reciprocans*." They tend to reciprocate what they get and often they give back more than they received. Samuel Bowles, Robert Boyd, Ernst Fehr, and Herbert Gintis summarize the model of *Homo reciprocans* as follows. *Homo reciprocans* comes to new social situations with a propensity to cooperate and share, responds to cooperative behavior by maintaining or increasing his or her level of cooperation, and responds to selfish, free-riding behavior by retaliating against the offenders, even at a cost to himself/herself, and even when he or she could not reasonably expect future personal gains from such retaliation (Bowles et al. 1997).

The contrast between mainstream Western economics and Buddhist Economics can be illustrated as two frameworks in opposition (Zsolnai 2007). Mainstream Western economics represents a maximizing framework. It wants to maximize profit, desires, markets, instrumental use, and self-interest and tends to build a world where "bigger is better" and "more is more." Buddhist Economics represents a minimizing framework where suffering, desires, violence, instrumental use, and self-interest have to be minimized. This is why "small is beautiful" and "less is more" nicely express the essence of the Buddhist approach to economic questions, as seen in table 18.1.

Table 18.1 Mainstream Western economics versus Buddhist Economics

Mainstream Western Economics	Buddhist Economics
maximize profit	minimize suffering
maximize desires	minimize desires
maximize markets	minimize violence
maximize instrumental use	minimize instrumental use
maximize self-interest	minimize self-interest
“bigger is better”	“small is beautiful”
“more is more”	“less is more”

The Emergence of Buddhist Economics

The Western discourse on Buddhist Economics begins with British economist E. F. Schumacher. In the 1950s and 1960s, Schumacher was working as an economic advisor in Southeast Asia, including Burma. He realized that the Western economic models are not appropriate for Buddhist countries because Western models are based on a different metaphysics than that of the Far Eastern worldviews.

In his best-selling book *Small Is Beautiful*, Schumacher states that the central values of Buddhist Economics are simplicity and nonviolence (Schumacher 1973). From a Buddhist point of view, the optimal pattern of consumption is to reach a high level of human satisfaction by means of a low rate of material consumption. This allows people to live without pressure and strain and to fulfill the primary injunction of Buddhism: “Cease to do evil; try to do good.” As natural resources are limited everywhere, people living simple lifestyles are obviously less likely to be at each other’s throats than those overly dependent on scarce natural resources.

According to Buddhists, production using local resources for local needs is the most rational way of organizing economic life. Dependence on imports from afar and the consequent need for export production is uneconomic and justifiable only in exceptional cases. For Buddhists there is an essential difference between renewable and nonrenewable resources. Nonrenewable resources must be used only if they are absolutely indispensable, and then only with the greatest care and concern for conservation. To use nonrenewable resources heedlessly or extravagantly is an act of violence. Economizing should be based on renewable resources as much as possible. Schumacher concludes that the Buddhist approach to economics represents a middle way between modern growth economy and traditional stagnation. It seeks the appropriate path of development, the Right Livelihood for people.

From the 1970s, Schumacher's conception of Buddhist Economics became popular in the West, especially among the members of the alternative and environmental movements. It was gradually recognized that Buddhist Economics is not only relevant for Buddhist countries but can help Western countries to solve their own problems, namely overconsumption, welfare malaise, and the destruction of nature.

From Asia one seminal contribution to Buddhist Economics was made by the Thai Buddhist monk and philosopher Ven. P. A. Payutto in his book *A Middle Way for the Market Place* (1992). He emphasizes that Buddhist teaching recognizes two different kinds of wanting: (1) *taṇhā*, the desire for pleasure objects; and (2) *chanda*, the desire for well-being. *Taṇhā* is based on ignorance, while *chanda* is based on wisdom. For example, people who are driven by *taṇhā* will seek to satisfy the blind craving for sensual pleasure, which, in this case, is the desire for pleasant taste. But when guided by *chanda*, desires are directed to realizing well-being.

Payutto stresses that from the Buddhist point of view, economic activity should be a means to a good and noble life. Production, consumption, and other economic activities are not ends in themselves; they are means, and the end to which they must lead is the development of well-being within the individual, within the society, and within the environment. Given that there are two kinds of desire, *chanda* and *taṇhā*, Payutto argues that there are two kinds of value, which we might term "true value" and "artificial value." True value is created by *chanda*. In other words, a commodity's true value is determined by its ability to meet the need for well-being. Conversely, artificial value is created by *taṇhā*—it is a commodity's capacity to satisfy the desire for pleasure. Consequently, we can distinguish between two kinds of consumption: "right" consumption and "wrong" consumption. Right consumption based on *chanda* is the use of goods and services to achieve true well-being. Wrong consumption arises from *taṇhā*; it is the use of goods and services to satisfy the desire for pleasing sensations or ego gratification.

Central to Buddhist doctrine is the wisdom of moderation. According to the Buddhist approach, economic activity must be controlled by the qualification that it is directed to the attainment of well-being rather than the "maximum satisfaction." In the mainstream Western economic model, unlimited desires are controlled by economic scarcity, but in the ideal Buddhist model they are controlled by an appreciation of moderation and the objective of well-being.

Payutto furthermore suggests that non-consumption can also contribute to well-being. Although monks eat only two meals a day before noon, they strive

for a kind of well-being that is dependent on little. However, if abstinence did not lead to well-being, it would be pointless, just a way of mistreating monastics. The question is not whether to consume or not to consume, but whether our choices lead to self-development.

Production is always accompanied by destruction. In some cases the destruction is acceptable, in others it is not. Production is only truly justified when the value of the thing produced outweighs the value of that which is destroyed. In some cases it is better to refrain from production. In industries where production entails the destruction of natural resources and environmental degradation, non-production is sometimes the better choice. In this light, non-production can be a useful activity. A person who produces little in material terms may, at the same time, consume much less of the world's resources and lead a life that is beneficial to the world around him or her. Such a person is of more value than one who diligently consumes large amounts of the world's resources while manufacturing goods that are harmful to society.

Payutto summarizes the basic aims of Buddhist Economics along two axes:

- (1) **Realization of true well-being.** The Middle Way, the right amount and knowing moderation may be considered as synonyms for the idea of balance or equilibrium. Knowing moderation means knowing the optimum amount, how much is "just enough and right." This optimum point, or point of balance, is attained when one experiences satisfaction at having answered the need for quality of life or well-being.
- (2) **Not harming oneself or others.** From a Buddhist perspective, economic activities are related to the three interconnected aspects of human existence: human beings, society, and the natural environment. Economic activity must take place in such a way that it does not harm oneself (by causing a decline in the quality of life) and does not harm others (by causing problems in society or in the environment).

In his book *Putting Buddhism to Work* former Japanese banker and economic thinker Shinichi Inoue presented his view of economics and Buddhism (Inoue 1997). Inoue claims that Buddhist motivation for work must be the pursuit of the interests of both oneself and others. According to Inoue, Buddhist Economic activities do not have profit as the principal goal. Instead, their primary objective is to serve the community in a wider sense. Profit may come, but it is a by-product rather than the main goal of business activities. Inoue emphasizes that to live necessarily involves the taking of life of other

beings. We cannot change that, but we can limit how many lives we take and to what extent we allow our desires to be satisfied. Gratitude toward other beings and a sense of regret about harming others are crucial considerations in Buddhism. It calls for the environmental and social assessment of products and industries which is already a highly developed practice in Japan and other advanced countries.

Finally, Inoue suggests that both production (P) and consumption (C) have to be considered. Production can be ranked according to four levels:

- P₁ = production that has a negligible negative impact on the environment,
- P₂ = production that has a minimal negative impact on the environment,
- P₃ = production that has some negative impact on the environment,
- P₄ = production that involves a great deal of negative impact on the environment.

Consumption can be assessed on a four-rank system:

- C₁ = consumption of goods that are vital for human existence,
- C₂ = consumption of goods that are not absolutely necessary, but make living better,
- C₃ = consumption of goods that are not very necessary,
- C₄ = consumption of goods that are frivolous or even harmful.

Table 18.2 presents the combination of these variables in order to determine whether the production of a product is relatively earth-friendly and the consumption of a product is truly necessary. The lower the number associated with a combination; the better it is for the environment and society.

In the Buddhist doctrinal view, any economic enterprise must be located in the context of the entire natural universe, so that ignoring environmental and

Table 18.2 Environmental and social assessment categories for production and consumption

	P ₁	P ₂	P ₃	P ₄
C ₁	1	2	3	4
C ₂	2	4	6	8
C ₃	3	6	9	12
C ₄	4	8	12	16

social costs is unacceptable. Economic efficiency should be redefined in the form of “not wasting.” For example, although recycling costs time and money, and may seem inefficient and troublesome, ultimately we are being more efficient by not wasting products. A recycling culture is economically sound.

In his publications Thai economist Apichai Puntasen addresses the problems of macroeconomics from an ideal Buddhist point of view (Puntasen 2005, 2007). Because of the different meanings of “happiness,” Puntasen suggests using *sukha*, a word drawn from Buddhist texts. One meaning of *sukha* is “wellness.” It also implies the state where pain is reduced, since less pain implies more *sukha*. On the other hand, pleasure does not necessarily imply less pain.

Sukha from acquisition is a lower level of *sukha*. It can be the same as hedonism in the Western sense. However, at this level of *sukha*, it must not cause any burden for one’s self or any other living beings. Even with this qualification, Buddhism recommends the attainment of a higher level of *sukha*, which arises from non-acquisition; it can also be derived from giving or helping others to be relieved from pain. The highest levels of *sukha* are derived from meditation, with the highest that of being emancipated or liberated from all impurities of mind or all the defilements: *nirvāṇa*.

It can be seen that *sukha* is more associated with mental development than with any form of material acquisition. The most important tool to achieve this mental stage is through training of the mind through meditation to reach the stage of *pañña* (Skt. *prajñā*; “wisdom,” “insight”) the ability to understand reality clearly, everything according to its own nature. Therefore, *pañña* is instrumental in being relieved from pain. With no pain, it will be *sukha* or wellness of the mind, despite the inevitable decline of the mortal body. An individual who perfects his or her *pañña* may experience enlightenment. In the end, Puntasen thus suggests that the mode of production in Buddhist Economics can be defined as *pañña-ism*. Human beings who have *pañña* center their lives on compassion and act dispassionately; they do not seek to maximize pleasure or utility but endeavor to relieve others of pain as much as possible.

According to Puntasen, *pañña* can be used to examine the factors of economic input, such as technology, capital forms, and natural resources. The production process should be done in such a way as to enhance the good qualities of human inputs. The process should generate human skills and creativity as well as provide a sense of fulfillment at the workplace. Minimal use of nonrenewable resources should be constantly practiced, while use of renewable resources should be encouraged in place of nonrenewable resources as much as possible. Waste from the production process should be kept at a minimum. The need for production to be increased to meet increased demand for

consumption is not required in Buddhist Economics, since consumption will also be in moderation. As only moderate consumption is needed, the rest can be donated to others who are still in need. Peace and tranquility are results of the ability to understand everything in its own nature or having *pañña*.



Buddhist Economic Solutions and Models

Contemporary contributions of Buddhist Economics to pressing problems of sustainability, happiness, and well-being should also be discussed. Also some inspiring Buddhist Economic models such as the Santi Asoke movement in Thailand and the Gross National Happiness policy framework in Bhutan are worthy for presentation. Finally, some attention could be paid to the application of Buddhist mindfulness practices for organizational renewal and business leadership.

Sustainability

Australian environmental scholar and Buddhist thinker Peter Daniels describes sustainable production and consumption as situations where goods and services are provided, used to fulfill basic human needs, and bring a better quality of life—while keeping natural-resource use and emissions of toxic and other waste (over the life cycle and the supply- and post-use chains) at levels that will not jeopardize the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Daniels 2007).

Daniels notes that both in the Buddhist and sustainability perspectives choices about what we seek and pursue from life and the environment should accurately reflect the impact of these choices on our long-term well-being. From the Buddhist view, the underlying problem is that people lack knowledge about the appropriate path to a sustained state of satisfaction or contentment. People repeatedly experience the inability of want-pursuit based on external phenomena to bring lasting satisfaction, but they generally do not learn the lesson that suffering cannot be overcome from grasping or clinging to material objects or activities.

Peter Daniels argues that for the natural environment, appropriate changes in beliefs, attitudes, and motives—based on the law of karma—should have a beneficial impact by minimizing or at least moderating and managing consumption so that material and energy throughput (and hence environmental exploitation) is substantially reduced. Awareness of the karmic spillovers of material and energy consumption would act to decrease the overall biophysical

scale of material output demanded and consumed as well as instigating fundamental changes in the nature or composition of economic output. The significance of cause-effect chains, with ramifications far beyond the primary target of the originator's action (and usually back upon the initial agent), is closely aligned with the incorporation of "spillover effects" or "externalities" into production and consumption decisions.

A major target of Western economic approaches has been to reduce the biophysical metabolism of the economy to reduce impact per unit of welfare output. To date, the "rebound effect," or growth in consumption capability from technological efficiencies and economic growth has predominantly acted to offset reduced environmental harm from eco-efficiency gains. The ability to moderate and dematerialize the rebound effect will be instrumental for sustainable consumption and Buddhism has important offerings in its worldview.

Techniques of socioeconomic mapping metabolism for reducing society's impact on nature is consistent with Buddhism's goal of reducing material and energy throughput. At root, they concur with an ethos of the improvement of human physical and spiritual well-being pivoted upon understanding of the interconnectedness of human existence and nature. The approach of a Buddhist-related value system would be strongly supportive for an economic system based on dematerialization and metabolism reduction. Hence, it could help fulfill the vital need for a philosophical and humanistic foundation for the technological and structural changes required for harmonious coexistence.

The Happiness Problem

British economist and Buddhist helper Colin Ash notes that the sense of happiness extends in three dimensions. The most immediate is hedonic, sensual, and emotional—pleasurable feelings. Then there is a more cognitive, judgmental evaluation of the balance of pleasant and unpleasant feelings over the longer term. The broadest and most normative concept of happiness relates to the quality of life, human flourishing, and the realization of one's potential—the Aristotelian "eudemonia" (Ash 2008). Ash suggests that from contemporary happiness research we can draw some major empirical insights about happiness and income:

- (1) Over the past fifty years rich countries (e.g., the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan) have become much richer; for example, average real incomes have more than doubled. However the evidence shows that people are on average no happier. In the economics literature, this is known as "Easterlin's Paradox." Research by psychologists and political scientists

reach the same conclusion. In fact depression, suicide, alcoholism, and crime have risen. Happiness in poor countries, on the other hand, has increased on attaining higher income.

- (2) Rich countries are usually happier on average than poor countries. Obviously other things besides income determine happiness. Why is New Zealand about as happy on average as the United States when average income in the United States is almost double New Zealand's? Vietnam has half the per capita income of Ukraine, yet the Vietnamese are on average almost twice as happy.
- (3) Within rich countries, the rich are much happier than the poor. However increases in income have not made either group any happier.

Colin Ash argues that extra income certainly matters, but only when we do not have a lot of it. For an individual or a society struggling to subsist, an extra dollar can significantly raise well-being. Once income per head exceeds about \$20,000 (at 2005 prices), extra income appears to have very little additional impact on happiness, *ceteris paribus*. There are diminishing marginal returns.

The pursuit of income and consumption is unsatisfactory in itself because of eventual adaptation and social comparison. Trapped on hedonic and social treadmills, we over-invest our time in paid work and associated commuting at the expense of building and maintaining valuable relationships with family and friends, and within the wider community. Clearly many of our choices—what to buy, how many hours to work—often do not bring us happiness.

Research shows that social relationships have a more lasting impact on happiness than does income. Close relationships—in our family, with friends, at work, in our community, as members of a voluntary organization or religious group—make us happy, as well as providing love, support, and material comfort. These are high trust relationships and trust between people is an important contributor to personal happiness. Divorce, widowhood, and unemployment have a significant and lasting negative impact on our well-being. Unemployment hurts beyond the loss of income as social ties are broken, and rising unemployment causes insecurity which reduces the happiness of even those who do have jobs.

Nevertheless, happiness is not the ultimate goal of Buddhism, warns Colin Ash. The cessation of suffering is. A bodhisattva is a savior-being: the bodhisattva's vow of compassion is to free all sentient beings from suffering, not to make them happy. Buddhism could therefore be viewed as a form of negative utilitarianism.

Economic and Public Policy Experiment

The Santi Asoke Buddhist Reform Movement of Thailand represents a practical realization of an ideal Buddhist Economic model. Asoke communities are organized around the principles of “meritism,” specified in the slogan “Consume Little, Work Hard and Give the Rest to Society” (Essen 2011).

Residents in the Asoke communities limit their consumption by adhering to the Buddhist precepts, sharing communal resources, and following the environmental edict, “The Four Rs” (recycle, reuse, repair, reject). Deeply concerned with the root defilement, greed, Asoke members value “to be content with little.” Yet they caution members to consume enough, following the Buddhist Middle Way of neither extreme asceticism nor extreme luxury. Another idea that members put forth is “to be satisfied with what one has,” in accordance with the Buddha’s revelation that desire causes suffering.

Work serves in Asoke communities as a primary method of meditation. Members practice “open eye” meditation continuously as they work and interact with others within their community. Following the original meaning of the Thai word for work, *gnan*, the Asoke people’s activities include working for one’s livelihood as well as attending meetings, chanting, eating, watching movies, and chatting with neighbors in their understanding of work.

“Giving the rest to society” is a training in selflessness or non-self. Giving to make merit is a common practice for all Thai Buddhists, yet Asoke Buddhists do not just give typical temple offerings. They promote material and spiritual development in Thai society through many means. For instance, they run vegetarian restaurants and nonprofit markets that simultaneously provide healthy food and useful goods at low cost while promoting the concept of meritism.

The concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) has gained worldwide recognition. Sander Tideman reminds us that the concept was first expressed by the King of Bhutan in the 1980s in response to Western economists who visited Bhutan and regarded it as a “poor” country by standards of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). While acknowledging that Bhutan may score low on the scale of conventional economic indicators, the King of Bhutan claimed that his country would score high on an indicator measuring happiness (Tideman 2011).

Bhutan’s leaders define Gross National Happiness in terms of four pillars: economic development, good governance, cultural preservation, and nature conservation. The benefit of the model is that it includes conventional measure of economic performance while complementing it with “higher level” components. GNH can also serve as a tool for policymaking when confronted with conflicting interests. Typically, political decisions are made on the

basis of trade-offs. For example, when faced with the choice between providing employment versus the preservation of environment, most governments would choose the former. The GNH model shows that this trade-off should be made in the context of a certain hierarchy of values. Otherwise policymakers will continue to sacrifice higher values for lower values, longer-term interests for shorter-term interests, and cause investments in sustainable development to be put off. If GNH can be developed into a comprehensive tool incorporating all relevant values for a happy life, it will free governments from defaulting to economic decisions on the narrow paradigm of materialism (Tideman 2011).

The Government of Bhutan has made efforts to popularize the concept of GNH worldwide. It established the Center for Bhutan Studies, which measures year by year the advancement of the Bhutanese society according to GNH (Center for Bhutan Studies 2014).

Organizational Renewal and Leadership

Many economic institutions in the West are characterized by high levels of anxiety leading to increasing absenteeism along with mental and physical burn-out. Part of the problem is caused by the modern managerial strategies, which increasingly leave individuals with a sense of isolation, and often—through the overuse of modern technologies—out of contact with nature and a normal sensory world.

British organizational scholar and Buddhist teacher Bronwen Rees and Hungarian Tibetologist Tamas Agocs suggest that a secularized Buddhist method can address issues of power and release the creativity and sense of community in the modern workplace. To create a “reflective ground” is crucial to the work which brings a movement away from a cause and effect model to one of conditionality. In such a model, the individual is challenged to acknowledge that his or her behavior always contributes to the conditions and is to some degree reflected in all other conditions that make up the situation as it is. It is then a step toward taking fuller responsibility for the situation in that the individual is located in an interpenetrating and interdependent field of human activity (Rees and Agocs 2011).

Rees and Agocs see the strength of this approach in the possibility of finding ways of relating that go deeper than that of language, since the awareness practices work at emotional, bodily, and intellectual levels, and therefore of finding ways of communicating that undermine the common Western drive toward a task-based outcome. Relationship is privileged over outcome. Diversity is welcomed in an open approach that encourages a mutual exploration of experience. Transcendence is seen as a transcendence of self and a

heightened and ever-growing understanding of the interpenetration and connection of our lives.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Dutch management consultant Laurens van den Muyzenberg emphasize the importance of mindfulness in business leadership. Leading yourself requires mental discipline. All people have ego-centric tendencies like greed, jealousy, craving for material goods, and a desire for recognition. Buddhists refer to these as negative thoughts and emotions and recommend training the mind via meditation to reduce these negative tendencies. The first step is mindfulness, that is, to become aware when negative thoughts and emotions start coloring the thinking in the mind (Dalai Lama and van den Muyzenberg 2009).

In business, profit and competition are two fundamental issues. Profit is a necessary condition for business to survive. However leaders that consider the sole goal of business as making maximum profits hold a wrong view. Profit is the result of having satisfied customers, satisfied employees, and satisfied shareholders and other stakeholders. Leaders have to meet the challenge of balancing these interests. Very important is a holistic view. Businesses have a responsibility for the long-term effects of what they produce.

Global technology companies including Google are connecting to the power of mindfulness and meditation to drive sustainability and happiness in their business functioning. They employ the advice of the Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh and other Buddhist thinkers on how practicing mindfulness meditation at the workplace may help companies to improve “the bottom line” (Confino 2014). However, the question remains whether “doing things rights” without “doing the right things” in mainstream business truly contributes to the noble goal of reducing suffering.



Conclusions

Simon Zadek asks the important question of whether Buddhist Economics is able to penetrate the modern economy to prevent it from driving us along a materially unsustainable path and to uproot its growing hold on our psychological conditions. He believes that we have no choice but to engage in modernization in an attempt to redirect it or at least reduce its negative effects (Zadek 1997).

Buddhist Economics is best viewed as an alternative strategy, which can be applied in a variety of economic contexts. Buddhist Economics may help Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike to create sustainable livelihood solutions

which aim to reduce suffering of human and nonhuman beings by practicing want negation, nonviolence, caring, and generosity based on the liberating insight of the Buddha, the no-self.

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“We Can Do No Less”

BUDDHISM AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

*Anna Brown**Introduction*

This chapter considers the ways in which social justice activism and Buddhist practice can positively influence how one teaches in a college classroom. In addition, it shares practices, which have been enriched by Buddhist meditation, for teaching the subject matter of social justice. It is written in the form of a personal reflection. As such, it includes some of my own experiences in social justice activism and Zen Buddhism, as well as the stories of activists and Buddhists to whom I often turn for inspiration and guidance. In this chapter, the practices, experiences, and stories that I will focus upon primarily are those of affirmation, “staying put,” and building community. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the practice of gratitude.

In his poem, “For Frida,” Daniel Berrigan, (1921–2016), the Jesuit, poet, and activist, invokes the Buddhist teachings, “when hungry, eat, when weary, lie down” (1998: 242). He also asks, in the manner of a master, that we take another look. In so doing, we find a contrary demand: “in fasting, vigiling, go counter to the stampede of well-being. The bodhisattva is neither stuporous nor sleek, he is crucified” (242). Given this end, there may be an impetus to turn away from Berrigan’s teaching since it is so demanding. But the practices both of social justice and Buddhism are practices that do demand much of us, because they understand that there is so much in us to give in a finite amount of time. In this sense, they are practices of great affirmation, of the great “Yes” despite all.

The work of teaching social justice and Buddhism begins with the practice of each. Quite simply, there is no learning without doing. With the doing

of each comes a certain clear-sightedness, both of the suffering in the world and the emptiness of the world. The gifts of social justice and Buddhism well complement each other in this instance. The practice of social justice demands that we do not look away from the social, political, economic, and environmental suffering; the practice of Zen Buddhism demands that what we see does not paralyze us. The teaching of each can also hone the skills of community building and compassion. As we continue in the practice and teaching of social justice and Zen Buddhism, we most certainly come to the point of “crucifixion,” or the annihilation of the “self,” whether it is in a jail cell, in the *zendo*, or in the circumstances of our daily lives. When we “put on the universe as a garment” (Berrigan 1970: 64), as Simone Weil would have it, we see that there are many in the world for whom such annihilation, be it through warfare, impoverishment, torture, and so on, is a brutal reality and not something that would be chosen.

In my own experience of being a student, those teachers who remain with me evidenced something “more” than just intellectual brilliance: those classes that were formative introduced something more than just competency in a particular academic field. My choice to write about affirmation, staying put, building community, and gratitude point to the something more that was offered to me and that continues to challenge me to the present day. Etty Hillesum, a Dutch Jewish woman of remarkable insight, writes of this something more while living in an internment camp and a few months before she died in Auschwitz:

Leading lights from cultural and political circles in the big cities have also been stranded on this barren stretch of heath five hundred by six hundred meters. . . . These figures wrenched from their context still carry with them the restless atmosphere of a society more complicated than the one we have here. . . . Their armor of position, esteem, and property has collapsed, and now they stand in the last shreds of their humanity. They exist in an empty space, bounded by earth and sky, which they must fill with whatever they can find within them—there is nothing else.

One suddenly realizes that it is not enough to be an able politician or a talented artist. In the most extreme distress, life demands quite other things.

Hillesum 1986*b*: 35–36

Although I can write only from my own experience, the practices pointed to in this chapter have not come solely from the dint of my own effort. If there is anything that I have come to see, it is the realization of how indebted I am to the gifts, hard work, and insights of my teachers, of my students,

and of peacemakers. In addition, there are those “teachers,” such as Maha Ghosananda and Etty Hillesum, whom I cite in this chapter but whom I have never met personally. Still, their work, vision, and legacy often make their way into my classroom and into the lives of my students. Within the course of teaching, I also find that there is a veritable feast of traditions and truths from which we choose to make our way in this world. The focus of this chapter on Buddhism and social justice stems from my own experience and does not intend, therefore, to slight the compelling claims of other traditions and truths.



An Affirmation

In the tenth koan of the *Mumonkan*, a seasoned Zen monk considers himself to be poor and, in a meeting with his teacher, Master Sozan, asks his teacher to make him rich. Master Sozan responds: “Having tasted three cups of the best wine of Seigan, do you still say that your lips are not yet moistened?” (Zenkei Shibayama 1974: 82). This is a wonderful response of great affirmation. Will the student, Seizei, see it that way? In our own lives, perhaps a drop of rain, a blade of grass, or a small pebble can substitute for the “best wine of Seigan.” In looking carefully, that is to say, through much Zen practice, is the whole of the universe in that drop of rain? Is it possible to see the richness that is right there and in this moment?

I do not wish to conflate Zen insight and social justice analysis. I will suggest, rather, that this particular Zen insight may enrich the teaching of social justice. As a teacher of political science and social justice, it is tempting to entitle each of my lectures, “The Bad News,” for there is so much bad news these days about economic and political systems, social crises, or environmental destruction. In the early years of teaching, my preferred practice was to announce and analyze one catastrophic event after another. Much like the angel in Paul Klee’s drawing, *Angelus Novus*, all that I could see was a series of disasters, one piled on top of the next. I had the good fortune at that time to be in community with Daniel Berrigan, a Jesuit poet and activist. During one of our Kairos¹ community meetings, I followed my usual practice. Selected to offer the community’s reflection for the evening, I spent a good thirty minutes reporting on a book that detailed the atrocities committed by a US-based private security firm operating in Iraq. In a letter that Berrigan kindly wrote to me that same evening, he offered this challenge: “We know well enough what the bad news is; what is the Good News?”²

Berrigan also asked if I had noticed the impact of my report on the community. To paraphrase, he asked if I had noticed the community's response of silence and listlessness. I recall being stopped in my tracks while reading that letter. No, I had not made any of the observations that he had. More so, Berrigan had hit the mark spot on: I had missed an opportunity to share the gift of Good News. In his poem, "Prayer for the Morning Headlines," Berrigan balances the "bad news" by giving due to "the slight edge of life."³ For Berrigan, even if we come up with nothing or very little, we are to bless that. In this spirit, he writes (in capitals):

MERCIFULLY GRANT PEACE IN OUR DAYS. THROUGH YOUR HELP MAY WE BE FREED FROM PRESENT DISTRESS . . . HAVE MERCY ON WOMEN AND CHILDREN, HOMELESS IN FOUL WEATHER, RANTING LIKE BEES AMONG GUTTED BARNS AND STILES. HAVE MERCY ON THOSE (LIKE US) CLINGING ONE TO ANOTHER UNDER FIRE. HAVE MERCY ON THE DEAD, BEFOULED, TRODDEN LIKE SNOW IN HEDGES AND THICKETS. HAVE MERCY, DEAD MAN, WHOSE GRANDIOSE GENTLE HOPE DIED ON THE WING, WHOSE BODY STOOD LIKE A TREE BETWEEN STRIKE AND FALL, STOOD LIKE A CRIPPLE ON HIS WOODEN CRUTCH. WE CRY: HALT! WE CRY: PASSWORD! DISHONORED HEART REMEMBER AND REMIND, THE OPEN SESAME: FROM THERE TO HERE, FROM INNOCENCE TO US: HIROSHIMA DRESDEN GUERNICA SELMA SHARPEVILLE COVENTRY DACHAU INTO OUR HISTORY, PASS! SEED HOPE. FLOWER PEACE.⁴

For Berrigan, our work in this world is that of affirmation, to "seed hope and to flower peace" while seeing clearly and living amidst the bad news of the day. When the Sufi poet, Rumi, wrote, "Don't beg for a crust from me when you're carrying a basket full of bread on top of your head" (Freke 2000: 43), he makes a point similar to Berrigan's. Each of us is the Good News and possessed of so much good bread—now see it and share it. There are certainly a myriad of traditions, teachings, and practices that help to "see it and share it." For me, one of these is a Zen meditation practice that helps me to "see it" while another is the work of social justice teaching and activism that helps me to "share it." Of the many things to see and to share, I will start with affirmation, or the ability to live the "Yes," despite all.

When I simply sit and simply observe anything that comes up, I have begun the work of the practice. When I let go of my habit of stating, "I like

this,” “I don’t like that,” it is then that I can plunge into the practice without hesitation, with “no hindrance in the mind” as the *Heart Sutra* reminds us. At this point in the work, there is nothing that “stinks of Zen” or smacks people over the head with a self-righteous social justice stance. When the work gets done, less attention is paid to “who” is doing the work. We finally come to see that “no one” is doing the work and that the categories of “doer” and “receiver,” “friend” and “enemy” collapse. At this point, we have the wonderful opportunity to leave the cramped house of the ego and self and enter into our natural home of “no-self.” What a delight the world of no-self is! How full of energy and light! Yes, there are a myriad of social crises and heart-wrenching realities that can break the resolve of even the most stalwart of social justice activists. And yet, and yet . . . the vastness of no-self holds all and allows for the energy that Psalm 100 speaks of: “make a joyful noise,” even now, even when it is so dark. Let’s get the work done . . . joyfully!

In an interview with Zen teacher, Charlotte Joko Beck, she evidenced a bit of impatience with Zen students who wished to speak with her about some dazzling moment or another experience while sitting zazen. “Yes,” she said, “tell me about your ‘moment’ but tell me also, ‘how are you and your wife getting along?’”⁵ I might well ask the same about my political science teaching and about social justice activism: How am I getting along with my students? Have I closed out those who do not agree with my teachings? Have I shouted in anger at someone who opposed my community at a political demonstration? Have I fallen into the trap of taking sides, all the while forgetting that most basic of Zen teachings, interdependence? The latter point is one the most difficult, I have found, to work through for a social justice teacher and activist. And yet, on this business of taking sides, Berrigan suggests, “What an abstract notion that is, after all, stale, fraught with jealousy, ego. Can we not offer something better to our times?” (Berrigan 1978: 69).

The concreteness of Zen practice—the act of sitting down, the act of standing up, the act of taking one step, and so on, is a tool that may be well used to see through the hoary abstraction of the side, or at least that side which champions ideology and reified ideals over human beings. The practices of teaching, of Zen Buddhism, and of social justice activism offer the challenge to put practice over platitudes or pieties. Isn’t it marvelous, this work of affirmation and this act of plunging in, without hesitation?

The teaching of Buddhism and social justice affords us the opportunity to plunge in and without hesitation. Upon entering the classroom, is it possible to realize the energy, vitality, and insight of Master Sozan? If it is understood that each student is “the best wine of Seigen,” whether that student realizes it

or not, how does the way of teaching change? From my experience the change has been threefold. First, the temptation to obsessively judge whether or not a class is going well or badly has lessened, thereby freeing up an energy that may be used to devote myself more fully to each student and to the subject matter of the class. Second, I have come to appreciate more deeply the inherent nobility of each student. When each is possessed of so much richness, how can I not be gladdened? Third, I make more of an effort to find examples of those who have “stayed human” in dark times and to include these examples in my lectures and assigned readings. In a recent seminar on genocide, I found that my students were thirsting for such examples. They now know, for example, the stories of the White Rose, of Franz Jaggerstatter, and of the community of Le Chambon, all of whom either resisted Hitler and the horrible onslaught of the Nazis or who harbored Jewish people, often at great risk to themselves.



Staying Put

Reading the phrase “Joshu’s lips give off light” (Zenkei Shibayama 1974: 68), never fails to move me deeply. It is an attribution, of course, the Master Joshu, who, in the seventh koan of the *Mumonkan* (67), asks a young monk whether or not he has had breakfast. When the monk responds in the affirmative, Joshu then instructs him to wash his bowls. The monk, new to the monastery, had asked the Master for instruction, yet the Master responds by asking about a meal and reminding him to clean up. The last line of Mumon’s poem, which accompanies the koan, reads, “The meal has long been cooked” (67). What is so special about the daily tasks of eating and cleaning? Fortunately, that realization is open to each of us, regardless of the station or circumstances of our lives. What is required, simply, is staying put within the practice, in this case, of Zen Buddhism.

In a recent interview, Berrigan recalled something that he has learned from his good friend, Thomas Merton. Merton, who, from time to time, invited social justice lay activists and religious to his monastery for days of prayer and reflection, from a Christian perspective, on a sacramental life, said to Berrigan: “Stay with these, stay with these, these are your tools and discipline, and these are your strengths . . . you are not going to survive America unless you are faithful to your discipline and tradition.”⁶ A few years ago, those of us in Kairos community came to grips with what Merton had been talking about in his conversation with Berrigan. In March 2004, we had joined forces with other political

activist communities to protest the ongoing war in Iraq. While marching down to the United Nations, members of the community joined in shouting political slogans. Upon reaching a police barricade that blocked our path to the United Nations, several members engaged in a tussle with police officers in order to climb under the barricade. At this point, Berrigan, who had been walking with us, had enough and left the demonstration. At the next Kairos meeting, he called us to account: Do you know nothing of nonviolent practice? Have you forgotten everything that you have learned? When circumstances change, why do you swing back and forth like a metronome? What roots you?

Once again, Berrigan hit the mark. How was it that, in an instant, the nonviolent practice that we had worked on for years in our community, slipped from our minds and hearts? In his poem, *Zen Shovel*, he points to the necessary work of rooting oneself: “the further you dig into origins, the deeper origins get.” Clearly, there is ground enough to be rooted. This experience coupled with Berrigan’s wisdom helped me to better appreciate the practice and work of the late Buddhist teacher, Samdech Preah Maha Ghosananda, who was often referred to as “the Gandhi of Cambodia.” My students in a seminar on genocide that I was teaching at the time had the good fortune of learning from one of his students, Bob Mott, who spoke to us in class. Mott first showed us a few slides of Ghosananda. In one of these slides, though he was simply standing with his hands in *gassho*, an astonishing vitality flowed from his figure. It was incredible to think that one was looking at a picture of the man and that he was not in the classroom with us.

Mott spoke to us of Ghosananda’s early training in a Thai forest monastery, close to the Cambodian border. During his training, Ghosananda learned of the 1969 “secret bombing” campaign of Cambodia unleashed by US military forces. Hundreds of thousands of Cambodians were killed during the bombing campaign. Before the war’s end, Ghosananda learned that his parents, all of his siblings, and many of his friends and fellow monks had been killed (Bhikku 2007: 34).

On many occasions during the war, a deeply saddened Ghosananda wished to return to Cambodia in order to help its suffering people. His teacher, the Venerable Ajahn Dhammadasa, however, had other plans for him:

Don’t weep. . . . Be mindful. Having mindfulness is like knowing when to open and when to close your windows and doors. Mindfulness tells us when is the appropriate time to do things. . . . You can’t stop the fighting. Instead, fight your impulses towards sorrow and anger. Be mindful. Prepare for the day when you can be useful to your country. Stop weeping and be mindful.

Bhikku 2007: 34

Ghosananda was asked to stay put in the monastery and to deepen his practice. In *Maha Ghosananda: The Buddha of the Battlefield*, Ghosananda speaks to the nature of his practice during this time:

In the monastery we learned to meditate this way [moving one hand up and down, slowly and rhythmically]. All day long, we moved the hand up and down, up and down, with mindfulness, following each breath carefully. Every day, we did only this—nothing more.

Bhikku 2007: 33

When Ghosananda returned to Cambodia in 1978, he embodied the Buddha of Berrigan's poem to his niece, one who runs contrary to the "stampede of well-being" and right into the maelstrom of life. Upon entering the Sakeo refugee camp located on the Thai border, the sick and starving Cambodian people in the camp flocked to him and received from him an early verse from the *Metta Sutta* which reads: "Hatred can never overcome hatred; only love can overcome hatred" (Bhikku 2007: 38). More so, those who met him in the camp received the living form of this verse. Benedictine monk James Wiseman recalls: "looking at the Venerable Ghosananda, one has the impression that not only his smile but his whole body is radiant. It seems as if his skin has been washed so clean that it shines" (Bhikku 2007: 78).

From his initial entry into the Sakeo camp, Ghosananda launched into fifteen years of endless effort on behalf of the Cambodian people, both civilians and soldiers alike. His many works found him doing everything from building temples and resettlement camps to serving on the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. He also assembled a peace army whose only ammunition was "bullets of loving kindness." His army, assembled for the purpose of six "*Dhammayatra*, a pilgrimage of truth or a peace walk, for Peace and Reconciliation" (Bhikku 2007: 45) would make peace one step at a time even while being fired upon or while skirting around landmines. Ghosananda was fond of saying: "Wars of the heart always take longer to cool than the barrel of a gun . . . we must heal through love . . . and we must go slowly, step by step" (Bhikku 2007: 44). The hardest step is that of loving an enemy. Ghosananda, relying on his Buddhist practice, understood that to see the "enemy" is to see "oneself."

Bhante Ghosananda—who said that his "Ph.D." from India's Nalanda University, truly meant "Person Has Dukkha" (Bhikku 2007: 31)—offers a great deal for those in the teaching profession. To come mindfully to the classroom, day after day, is a practice of "staying put." To work daily at our

own practice of Zen Buddhism and social justice activism presents yet another wonderful opportunity, one that is well expressed by Ghosananda:

We Buddhists must find the courage to leave our temples and enter the temples of human experience, the temples that are filled with suffering. If we listen to the Buddha, Christ, Gandhi, we can do nothing less. The refugee camps, the prisons, the battlefields then become our temples. We have so much work to do.

Bhikku 2007: 84

Regardless of where our temple is, be it the refugee camps or the classroom, there is, as Ghosananda tells us, “much work to do.” Each of us must decide what the best use of her gifts is at any particular time, though both Buddhism and social justice suggest that the reality of suffering and the work of alleviating that suffering be at the center of the curriculum and of classroom practices. When Ghosananda says, “we can do no less,” there is an urgency that must be recognized. On one level, there is an urgent need to tend to those who are suffering impoverishment, to those who are homeless, to those who are afflicted by the waging of war, and so on. On another level, there is an urgent need to see how much is lost when the resources of society are consumed by the few at the expense of the many or when its leadership is preoccupied with the perpetuation of hostilities and the waging of war. As to the latter point, Berrigan, like Ghosananda, asks that we pay careful attention to this reality:

Though the rich grow richer, and great fortunes grow on a war economy, the poor of the world have nowhere to go, except deeper into the pit.

The poor know this, and they know something more. They know that as long as such a war as ours continues, the rich grow poorer—poorer in human resources, in everything that counts for a human future. The emperor can deal with his enemies; but that, after all, is a savage and inferior talent. What he cannot do is order his own life in the paths of mercy and love; as his skill grows in the waging of war, he loses the power to wage peace. His mind dulls; he is governed more and more by caprice and distraction and impulse; he literally cannot imagine what human needs are, who his neighbor is, and what stewardship demands of him.

Berrigan 1965: vii



Building Community

“From the top of a pole one hundred feet high, how do you step forward?” (Zenkei Shibayama 1974: 311). Zen Master Sekiso asks this question in the forty-sixth koan of the *Mumonkan*. A commentary on the koan instructs further: “A Zen man of real attainment and capability is one who has cast off the holy smack of *satori*. . . . This is why humble attitudes and compassionate work are to be developed. To talk about such a Zen life may be easy, but to live it is not easy at all” (Zenkei Shibayama 1974: 312). Fortunately, daily life in community with others provides an excellent opportunity to “step forward.”

Right relationships with other human beings are often refined and mastered in community, though, as is noted in the preceding commentary, this may be difficult work at times. During these difficult times, I often think of the scene in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, where a doctor confesses to Father Zossima that the more he “loved mankind, the less [he] loved people in particular, that is, individually, as separate persons” (Dostoevsky 1991: 57). Indeed! Is it not the case that a sangha member blowing his nose in the *zendo* can perturb even a seasoned Zen practitioner? Or, that someone holding the opinion that United States must continue the war in Afghanistan can unhinge the peacemaker? These maddening moments, of course, are a gift of infinite measure for surely they encourage the deepening of practice, whether it be our practice of Buddhism, of social justice, or of teaching. Berrigan, often writes of the central role of communal life in the work of peacemaking. In his book, *The Dark Night of Resistance*, he speaks of community life, more specifically, communities of resistance, as an antidote to the alienating influences of a world hell bent upon waging war:

I have a dream; I dream of every resisting commune with a guru (Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Zen) in roving residences; sharing that thing, whatever its risks and follies; leading men and women into their unexplored inner spaces; making room for love, for hope, where there seemed no room because there was no light.

Berrigan 1971: 12

In a final journal entry that she entered while imprisoned at the Nazi-controlled camp of Westerbork, Etty Hillesum wrote, “We should be willing to act as a balm for all wounds” (Hillesum 1986a: 550). A few months prior to that entry, she wrote another: “German soldiers suffer as well. There are no frontiers between suffering people, and we must pray for all of them.” As clearly Hillesum deeply understood and mastered right relationships, how did she do so? In part, she did so because she had mastered the practices of affirmation and of staying put, though she

followed a path other than that of Buddhism. In addition, she made the practice of community life a priority, even if only on a small scale to start. Thus, in another journal entry written while she was still living in Amsterdam in a community of Jews, Christians, Germans, Dutch friends, and students, she notes:

Ours was and is a bustling little world, so threatened by politics from the outside as to be disturbed within. But it seems a worthy task to keep this small community together as a refutation of all those desperate and false theories of race, nations, and so on. As proof that life cannot be set into pre-set molds.

Hillesum 1986a: 19

Hillesum's modest yet worthy task of community building well served those whom she met while in Westerbork. In some instances, her work was simply handing out lukewarm cups of coffee at breakfast. She did so, however, by giving herself fully to the task and to others thereby making it seem, as the camp's survivors have attested, as if she were handing out gold coins. After a few months in Westerbork, Hillesum had every reason to give up. Aside from having to navigate the horrifying conditions within the camp, she was often physically sick, many of her friends were dead or were soon to be sent to Auschwitz, and her parents and brother were now held with her in Westerbork. At this moment, Hillesum did not shut down but decided, instead, to widen the community of those she loved and served. She set herself the task of being the "thinking heart of the barracks" and then the "thinking heart of a whole concentration camp" (Hillesum 1986a: 543).

Just a few years earlier, Hillesum often lamented that she had so little time for others or to complete her work. She came to realize, however, that the feeling of "not having any time" was not so much literally true as it was more an indication of a chaotic and fragmented mind. Now, in the final months of her life, she found that she had "all the time in the world" to talk with others, to be present to them. At this point in her life, no one and no place were excluded. In the midst of the worst at Westerbork, Hillesum was able to say, "I feel at home. I have learned so much. We are at home" (Hillesum 1986a: 524).

The classroom presents a wonderful opportunity to build community, though it took me a few years into teaching to realize it. To build community in the classroom typically came in a distant second to the first of trying to teach well as much as possible of the subject matter of the class. Of course teaching well is important, but so is community life. The students with whom I work are come from the lower ranks of the middle class, working class; many are also first-generation college students. The recent financial crises and concomitant

rise in anti-immigrant sentiment in our country has certainly added to the fragility of their already precarious economic and social standing.

Taking a cue from Hillesum's early community building work in Amsterdam, I find that an intentional and mindful effort to build community with my students is a compassionate way of helping them work through fears and anxieties. Further, it is an antidote to the pressures to break bonds with other human beings, pressures that tend to be generated by unbalanced political and economic systems. Finally, the work of building community plays a significant role in the readings that I select for my classes. William Powers's book, *Twelve by Twelve: A One-Room Cabin beyond the American Dream and Off the Grid*, is one example of a book that I use to discuss environmental destruction and stewardship. Powers's book balances an analytical understanding of this destruction with stewardship efforts both by individuals and communities. It is a book that recommends meditation as much as it does action.



Gratitude

In his book, *Zen Gifts to Christians*, Roshi Robert Kennedy defines the Zen understanding that all things are empty by stating: "the Zen Buddhists mean the co-origination of all things: that is, nothing is separate" (Kennedy 2000: 79). This insight lends itself particularly well both to building community and living within community. Is it possible to see, through constant practice, that there is, finally, no separation between friend and foe? Is it possible to better navigate the petty obstacles that tend to torpedo relationships when the impermanence of all things, which is another understanding of emptiness, is appreciated? Is it possible, through the experience of practices, to see the fullness and richness of all things, yet another of the many gifts of emptiness? If this is seen, it seems to me there is less likely of a chance that others are dismissed or taken for granted. Certainly, an understanding of emptiness can be put to creative use in the building of community within the classroom.

When Roshi Kennedy's students sit with him, he often reminds them of the practice of gratitude and then waits for the student, sitting after sitting, to see the richness of what is offered to each at every moment. I have often followed this practice with my own college students. Before entering the class, I silently offer gratitude for the work at hand. When I meet with my students, I thank them for their insights, and their contributions. It seems right to me

to do this. It staggers the mind to realize that in all of time and in all of the places in the world, we happen to be meeting at this moment. Further, I realize that our meetings are finite and will pass quickly. How to live, then, when so much is at stake? Perhaps it is best to say “I don’t know,” by which I mean that when I am fully present in the work of teaching there are no students and no teacher; there is simply the teaching. There is a vast universe of possibility and energy right in that particular classroom and right with those particular students. We seem to well work as one and, on most days, I leave the class saying “what a love-fest, of one another, of the material, etc.”

There are many paths, traditions, and truths that help us to pay attention and to live “extravagantly.” Though but three ways of being in the world, Buddhism, social justice, and teaching lend themselves quite well to living with a generous and gracious heart. Each of these practices, though in their own particular way, work for liberation from suffering. For those whom desire to do so, it seems worthwhile to full-heartedly pursue these practices, even if the work is hard and our efforts result in so little. In another of his poems, “Zen Poem,” Berrigan points to what is possible when we are willing to walk through the furnace of each practice: “Listen, blessed is the one who walks the earth 5 years, 50 years, 80 years and deceives no one and curses no one and kills no one. On such a one the angels whisper in wonder; behold the irresistible power of natural powers—of height, and joy, of soul, of non belittling!”⁷

Notes

1. The Kairos Community was formed in 1977 as an ecumenical community committed to prayerful reflection and to regular acts of nonviolent civil disobedience in witness against ongoing nuclear weapons research, the waging of war, the use of torture, etc. In addition, the community focuses on ways of living more peacefully in the world. Its members meet on a biweekly basis in Daniel Berrigan’s New York City-based Jesuit residence.
2. The “Good News” refers to the life, words, promises, etc. of Jesus as documented in the Canonical gospels.
3. Berrigan often used this phrase when he gave the reflection in Kairos meetings.
4. Daniel Berrigan, “Prayer for the Morning Headlines,” in Berrigan 1998: 87–88.
5. Amy Gross, “Life’s Not a Problem,” *Tricycle* (Summer 2008), <http://www.tricycle.com/feature/lifes-not-a-problem>.
6. Catholic Peace Fellowship, “The Duty is Evident,” *The Sign of the Times* 8, no. 1 (2009): 11.
7. Daniel Berrigan, “Zen Poem,” in Berrigan 1998: 219.

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