

The Peripatetic Class: Buddhist Traditions and Myths of Pedagogy

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Assumptions that Lie Underneath the Classroom

This paper has its roots in a classroom incident that took place during an Introductory Course on Buddhist Traditions. I had been working through a standard introductory curriculum: the life of the Buddha, the four noble truths, the twelve-fold chain of interdependent origination, etc., when after class, a student from Thailand came to me in tears. She had a Buddha-image around her neck, a talisman that she had been wearing since childhood, and she could not reconcile the God “Buddha” she grew up with, with the “Buddhism” being taught in Religion 152,” in which a focus on the non-theistic polemics of the Theravadin tradition is standard fare.

This incident typifies one aspect of a greater issue; that of “disembodied pedagogy.” It is not that our information is wrong, or that our intentions are pernicious in any way; it is just that most of the scholastic traditions inherited from Descartes, and from humanistic disciplines trying to prove their worth by imitating the natural sciences, do not favor embodiment. Mind is to be developed and sharpened; a reasonably healthy body is needed to carry the mind on its way, but the two shall rarely if ever never meet. Schools known for their athletic departments are generally not the same ones known for their English or Religion departments. Students learn about religious traditions in ways that favor detached observation over engagement, textual study over fieldwork and practicum, universals over particulars, and sitting over movement, to name but a few areas of body/mind separation. These areas are amplified by a tradition of academic study in religion that must uphold non-engagement as a pre-requisite to serious scholarship.

This may have much to do with the subject itself, with the fact that religious fervor has more often than not been characterized as the antithesis of reasonableness and critical acumen (and not without good reason at times). Nevertheless, when the pendulum swings full-blown in the direction of disembodied objectivity, entire areas of religious experience are rendered invisible or insignificant. The subject, (i.e. the Buddha) tends to be gazed

upon, with the researcher taking on the role of an educated tourist, camera in hand, going into a temple. Those of us who have actually spent time in like temples know that such an approach is considered to be fundamentally rude at best, and is not at all appreciated by people who live and worship in particular sacral environments. But, in most contemporary institutions of higher learning, there is an “experiential line” between practice and study that is considered too precarious to cross.

The Teaching of Buddhist traditions may itself be inherently problematic in this regard: after all, the historical Buddha is said to have balked at the idea of teaching. How do you teach what lies beyond all conditions? Buddhist teaching traditions came up with a number of ingenious solutions to this question, many of them revolving around the concept of *upaya* or “skillful means” adapted to particular circumstances. But academics are not partisans, and indeed teaching from a partisan position is not critically responsible. Ronald Grimes and his associates at the Ritual Studies Laboratory identified the partisan position as “whoring” or an academic discourse in service of ideology and thus suspicious of both criticism and dialogue. To counter this, we are cautioned to avoid the pitfall of evaluating the truth-claims of various religious traditions. We feel secure with an extrinsic approach to our subject: one can discuss the history of the Buddhist tradition, its various doctrines, central ideas, and practices. But does this position lead to a full engagement with the discipline of study? Does it help one understand what it may mean to practice or believe? It certainly can help, but it can also move over into Grimes’ other category of avoidance; the posture of the impartial observer, said to be one of “voyeurism,” the non-involved gaze that may theorize without any risk of contact. Moreover, can one separate the study of the sociology or history of a tradition from the truth claims of that tradition and arrive at something other than a reflection of one’s own methodological predilections? What I am wondering about here are strategies of pedagogy that can negotiate through these polar positions and provide us with possibilities of a more comprehensive engagement with the our subject of inquiry.

Discussions of pedagogy in the college classroom generally focus on content and on various methods of presenting content. As long as we remain uniquely in this paradigm, however, the unbridgeable gulf between objectivity and engagement may also remain with us. Content-focus, as the all-in-all of an instructional scenario, only touches certain aspects of experience, usually verbal/analytic ones. This is particularly problematic in the teaching of Buddhist traditions, since so much of the “material” is dependent upon psycho-physical awareness: how one sits, breathes, and moves. Is there any possibility of introducing more embodied dimensions into the classroom experience that do not cross the lines of intellectual integrity?

The resonant issues run widely here: not just in terms of academic versus popular culture or objectivity versus engagement, but with regard to questions about the functions of scholarship, pedagogy, and liberal education itself. What do we in the “humanities” do when we teach? Do we engage in a pure intellectual enterprise free from other repercussions, do we “make knowledge,” the oxymoron that emphasizes the social assumptions underlying “pure research,” do we inspire one another to experience life in a more profound and meaningful way? Another way to express the depth of this issue is to simply ask, “Whom do we serve?” Frank Reynolds invokes “democracy” in his discussion of the current state of Buddhist studies, the British scholar, Monier-Williams, who compiled the massive Sanskrit-English dictionary found on the desk of every graduate student who studies Indian religions, invoked the Queen of England and her glorious mission of converting heathen peoples. On one level, there are our conscious intentions in teaching Buddhist traditions: to inform, compare, inculcate critical thought, etc. For the question, “Who does one serve,” presupposes people, institutions, and powers, to whom we direct our research and pedagogical agendas. On another level, however, there may be an entire slew of less than conscious pre-suppositions that inform our teaching methods. I am referring specifically to the mythic dimension and its underlying archetypal constructs that inform the scholastic endeavor. Myths and legends, of course, are rarely invoked when considering pedagogical discourse, even in the so-called humanities. Perhaps this is because recent theoretical practice is dedicated to “demythologizing.” For all have suffered from seeming skewed applications of myths, be they ones of “manifest destiny” or “a thousand years of glorious rule.” And yet, incidents such as the one that occurred in my classroom, in which a person’s own myth is shattered by the unbridgeable gulf between historical scholarly discourse and human experience, leads one to ask what constructs, animate our practice, not only socially but psychologically? This is where I would like to focus our attention. Let us ask, “Who are the forces now being served in the academy?” “How do they mesh with the academic study and teaching of religion?” And where, in particular, might the study and teaching of Buddhist traditions fit into the mix?

A Head without a Body

The archetype of “the thinker” (versus “Man thinking” as Emerson articulated it in his essay, “The American Scholar”) pre-supposes the primacy of content, information, and analysis. The body is a secondary inconvenience that needs to be ensconced in a row of chairs. In a classroom of

rows, there is literally no inter-facing, and there is an implicit architectonic hierarchy as students sit facing an all-knowing teacher/text. Moreover, the repeated goal of methodological rigor (derived from the natural sciences) tends to minimize anecdotal evidence as well as the suggestive power of myth and metaphor. “Rigor” translates into the “hard evidence,” the “male-hardness” of rigorous data, true potency found in technological application and theoretical standardization, whereas the impotent softness of anecdote, suggestion, and non-conclusive multiplicity produces no exterior technology. We encourage hard-headed thinking, a bodiless vision of Buddhism (the “ism” already tips one off to this) that tends to devalue embodied forms of religious life: ritual, meditation, social interaction, and non-liturgical lifestyles.

The Individual and Social Body

Another assumption that underlies much contemporary study and pedagogy is that of the primacy of the individual. The lone quest of the Buddha, for example, is given much more attention and glory than the intricacies of the sangha. And even discussions of the sangha are often undertaken under the assumption of a separated “individual monastic tradition,” as if it arose in a vacuum. The society that produced and supported monastic ways of living is often given passing mention at best. We learn and teach that Buddhism grew out of India, but the process of that growth, the way in which Buddhist practitioners managed to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves is relatively unexplored. In a similar vein, the writing and study of texts is often thought of as an individual enterprise. Much of the literature that is taught in classes on Buddhist traditions, for example, is discussed as an individual achievement, when they were in fact produced, and are still largely transmitted, through communities. But the communal process is rarely given its due. Pedagogy that fosters the constructs of individual ego-boundaries and uniquely personal processes would be considered to be a “patriarchal phenomenon” by feminist critics, and - no matter what terminology you prefer to use - the construct of the “individual” does seem to be deeply set in prevailing demeanor of research and pedagogy. How ironic in face of a tradition that eschews the idea of a separate self. Whole areas of possibility are lost in this scenario, and one can only wonder how this particular bias has swayed our visions of Buddhist traditions.

Modalities of Intelligence and Learning

The construct of the classroom is taken for granted, usually thought of as a given. So-called “innovative” ways of teaching often turn to media;

slides, movies, or computers, without challenging the underlying configurations present in pedagogical situations. These are all well and good innovations perhaps, but they function in forgetfulness of a tradition that was born outside of a classroom, that lived and breathed in a natural environment. The Buddha, it is said, answered the final challenge of Mara by tapping the ground, but we teach with literally no ground, no reference to the natural world. The Cartesian figure seated alone, heroically isolated in a self-created thought experiment, is only one of many possible learning modalities. Is thinking the only human function worthy of academic discourse? And is the thinking function the natural, detached province of the academy, or does it serve other agendas such as the economic interests of technological productivity? These are greater questions than can be addressed here, although addressed they should be. For present purposes, I want to briefly invoke Howard Gardner's work at the Harvard School of Education on multiple intelligences. For the last twenty years, Gardner and his colleagues have been arguing that a comprehensive education needs to acknowledge a broad spectrum of intelligence: verbal/linguistic, mathematical/logical, spatial, kinesthetic, musical, and interpersonal, to name but a few. To date, humanistic education on the college and university level (and hence the way Buddhist traditions are studied and taught) focuses almost overwhelmingly on the verbal and mathematical modes. One can only imagine the rich veins that would be discovered through the employment of intuitive methods to learn about meditation, spatial viewpoints to learn about mandalas, musical awareness to enter more deeply into the practice of chanting, and interpersonal perspectives to further explore the Buddhist ideal of compassion. From the Buddha, to Mozart, to Einstein, and on down, significant research is inspired by something beyond one's known boundaries, and this sense is shared by the humanist, artist, and scientist. To entertain new modalities of knowing is to consider a greater sense of one's personhood, to be able to relate more freely, that is less fixedly, with the rhetoric of one's discipline and its attendant archetypal forces. The Buddha worn around the neck may not mirror the discourse of the historical Buddha, but it may provide its own perspective, its own sustenance, and a grace that needs to be listened to.

The Peripatetic Possibility

In response to the above situations, I configured a series of pedagogical experiments here referred to as the "peripatetic possibility." In doing so, I was inspired by the likes of Aristotle, Gandhi, and, the historical Buddha: for it is said that Aristotle walked with his students, that Gandhi walked five miles a day, and that after achieving his enlightenment sitting under the

Bodhi tree, the Buddha walked (hence the mythological origin for *kinhin* or “walking meditation”). I was also moved by the story of a doctor acquaintance of mine, who was asked by the residents of a Native American reservation, “Can you dance?” Meaning, “Why should I accept your medicine if you are unable to dance for five days without food like our medicine people?” The doctor, wisely, did not try to dance in such a manner, but he did take the challenge seriously, and perhaps so should we in our encounters with “the other.”

Thus, I began the “peripatetic experiments” that I have performed in the classroom over the last two years; focusing not just on content but on the architectonics of pedagogy. These particular classes were held out of doors, in a moving, fluid environment. Students were asked to pay attention to what they heard and felt as well as to what they saw. Interestingly enough, we found that the walking class complimented the text-based classroom, with embodied experiences becoming automatic mnemonic devices that brought home a number of concepts that had previously been difficult to grasp. The following description details parts of our “classroom-stroll” through the Vassar College campus, and ways in which we engaged the terrain and the environment to deepen our understanding and experience of Buddhist traditions.

We begin our journey by walking through the Vassar farm, and immediately the issue of violence/non-violence comes to the fore. How would a Buddhist feel about stepping on ants, about the inevitable loss of life that occurs in the agricultural endeavor (this thread often leads to a discussion of the Jain tradition whose growth was somewhat concurrent with the Buddhist sangha, and how they handled the issue of harming other living beings). The farm is a perfect backdrop for the story of the historical Buddha cautioning a farmer not to plow up a snake, and subsequent reports that the Naga or serpentine-kingdom favored the Buddha from that moment on. The entire issue of Buddhism and environmentalism rises to the surface: what was the relationship to nature in the time of the Buddha? Does Buddhism, with its views of interdependency, lend itself to an environmental ethic, or are we transposing our own concerns onto the past? Finally, the “truth of impermanence” is brought to our attention with the Buddhist parable of the mustard seed: the Buddha asking a woman, who complained about the death of her child, to collect a mustard seed from every house that had not experienced death.

We pass the stream-fed lake on campus and discuss the example of “the frog in the well” that we recently heard and saw in a film featuring monks from Sri Lanka. The frog in the well cannot begin to imagine the boundaries of the ocean; the conditioned being cannot begin to conceptu-

alize the unconditioned state of nirvana. The caterpillar, moving from leaf to leaf, becomes a model for transmigration, with the metamorphosis from caterpillar to butterfly engendering a discussion of “who transmigrates from body to body” in Buddhist thinking. The rushing stream next to the pond brings the class’s attention to issues of temporality and the insubstantiality of a separate self. Where does the stream begin and the lake end? Was Heraclitus a Buddhist of sorts?

In spring, we are given the darshan (the vision) of the cherry trees on Vassar’s front lawn, whose blossoms open under the clear sky. Instead of just discussing the Japanese aesthetic of beauty in the face of death, and its transformation into various forms of Buddhist understanding and practice, we see it embodied before us. Moreover, we see it as we are walking, not sitting. Students speak to each other.

The teacher and the text pale before the panorama of nature. There is no need to sit, study, and memorize concepts here; for they are being coded into the body.

Later on, we pass Vassar’s rather large and imposing chapel. High up on the face of the stone chapel is a circular rose stained-glass window. Could this be considered a mandala? Are mandalas universal as Jung contended or are they culturally relative constructs? How does the twelve petaled circular window of the Vassar chapel compare with the Kalacakra visualization that we recently studied?

The library, the next large building on our walk, becomes a jumping off point to discuss canonicity and the translation of Buddhist texts, particularly in China. What determines the authoritative texts of a tradition? How was the Pali canon transmitted? Who decides what volumes are to be reproduced, and published, and included in the various collections of works that an “educated person” should read? Who paid for the recent renovation of the library? Could the Bodhisattva appear as a librarian, as a builder of buildings? If the Bodhisattva would come to campus now, what form might she take according to the application of skillful means?

As we pass the Junior Year Abroad Office, the discussion deepens. Is the Zen practiced by the Vassar Zen group, congruent with Zen Buddhism practiced in Japan? Is the entire college set up correspondent with an ancient monastery in any way? This thread often opens into a discussion of how Buddhist traditions adapted to whatever environment they found themselves in. We pass the Baldwin medical center and note the metaphor of the Buddha as physician. And we end our walk by the Main Building on campus, where the name of Matthew Vassar is inscribed, leading to a discussion of the “Founder” of the college, his “original intentions” and what the college has now become, all in terms of the Mahayana tri-kaya theory: the

teaching as the dharmakaya (body of essence or truth), the construct of the campus as the sambhogakaya (body of blissful emanations, and the founder as the nirmanakaya (historical Buddha). Finally, after taking this long walk through campus, students are asked if they were aware of their feet touching the ground during the walk (mindfulness), what they noticed, and if walking through the campus in this way changed habitual experiences of the terrain.

These “experiments,” were clearly effective, with the great majority of students expressing appreciation for the experiential component of the course, and even amazement at the way that the teachings seemed to come alive in a new light. Some offered suggestions for further peripatetic possibilities in the future, others discussed their initial resistances to a different kind of class and how they worked with them. At the end of the semester, this class was frequently mentioned in teaching evaluations as the “clincher” that led to a deepened engagement with Buddhist traditions and with the entire learning process itself.

Now all of this is admittedly problematic in an age where the disembodiment of the learning experience is taken as a given. But the academy needs to find a way to address the parts of the person that exist outside of the head, to offer ways of understanding that involve the panorama of human faculties, ways that do not subtly reinforce the divisions between the observers and the observed. Our teaching is charged to engage more than verbal intelligence, to consider the visions of nature, of silence, of space between and around thought. We may not be able to “dance” while fasting for five days, but we can begin to consider a fuller range of religious experience and expression, we can soften the boundaries between subject and object, mind and body, and in doing so honor the depth and breadth of the subjects that we are privileged to teach.