

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<https://thecjbs.org/>

Number 15, 2020

New Paths in Teaching Buddhist Studies Conference Report

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Conference Report

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SESSION 3: COMPLICATING MEDITATION IN THE CLASSROOM

Context

“New Paths in Teaching Buddhist Studies” was a conference at the University of Toronto, Robert H.N. Ho Centre for Buddhist Studies, in February 2020, organized by Dr. Frances Garrett, Dr. Sarah Richardson, and Dr. Betsy Moss.

The focus of the conference was on pedagogical challenges and techniques, rather than on the content of Buddhist Studies courses per se. There were seventeen presentations in total, and two keynote public lectures. Further details about the event may be found at <https://teachingbuddhism.net>

In this article, I will provide a synopsis of the presentations of the panel in which I was a participant. The focus of this panel was on exploring our assumptions about the role of meditation in Buddhist Studies courses and on providing alternative pedagogical models.

Expectations and Disappointments: How to Teach Meditation in a Buddhist Studies Program in Nepal

Philippe Turenne, Principal, Kathmandu University, Centre for Buddhist Studies at Rangjung Yeshe Institute

The Rangjung Yeshe Institute is situated in Ka-Nying Shedrub Ling in Boudhanath, Kathmandu, Nepal. Teachers come from both the monastery and academic backgrounds, so the format of classes is mixed. Students come from more than thirty-five countries; thirty percent are Nepali; ninety percent self-identify as Buddhist. Their motivation for entering the program is generally that they feel it improves their spiritual journey.

The goal of the course is to prepare scholar-practitioners, not to learn Buddhism as a strictly academic exercise. In setting up the program, exploring the canon, textual sources, and oral traditions was relatively straightforward, but ironically, meditation proved to be a more complicated matter.

Who would teach it? Who would hold the authority for transmission and learning? The lopons and khenpos said: “Not us; we’re scholars. Ask a lama.” The lamas said, “No, we’re not academically qualified.” The thought of a Westerner teaching meditation was ruled out as inappropriate. The abbot was noncommittal, but in the end a lupon taught the course.

What would be the format? The monastics and the academics were comfortable communicating orally, but not simply sitting in silent meditation with students. Silent meditation is only a small part of the monastic training, compared to group rituals. The feeling was, “I didn’t spend nine years studying in Shedra to sit silently with others. If you

want to sit silently, why come to a class? Only high lamas sit in silent meditation with groups of students and we aren't high lamas."

This clash of expectations between the Western teachers and the Tibetan monastic teachers about teaching meditation was initially unconscious and required considerable unpacking. This presented five main learning challenges for the teaching staff:

1. Why does experiencing Buddhism mean experiencing "meditation?" That is a modern Western invention aligned with our fascination for "authentic" Buddhism.
2. What sort of meditation should we teach? Something anybody could do without being harmful is required. But secular or secular-friendly shamatha isn't really representative of the scope of Buddhist meditation. We teach Lojong Mind Training but that comprises a whole philosophical and religious package that comes with it.
3. Do we take a scientific or ethnographic approach? Why are students amenable to meditation, but not to participating in a ritual?
4. Is there some other immersive practice that could achieve the same goals? Examples include taking the Five Precepts for a month or circumambulating Boudhanath stupa daily for a month.
5. We can be safer from imposing our modern ideas about Buddhism if we define our teaching and research approaches in conversation with representatives from living Buddhist traditions.

Teaching Buddhist Chaplaincy: An Integrated Approach

Dr. Jennifer Bright, Master of Pastoral Studies student, University of Toronto, Emmanuel College

Emmanuel College is home to the Applied Buddhist Studies Initiative as part of their Master of Pastoral Studies program. It is the first Buddhist chaplaincy training program in Canada. This program prepares graduates to be certified with the Canadian Association for Spiritual Care (CASC) and to be qualified to work as chaplains in hospitals, educational institutions, senior homes, prisons, other public institutions, and in Buddhist temples.

Dr. Bright presented a key practice for chaplaincy training required for certification by CASC and for the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario (CRPO): The Safe and Effective Use of Self (SEUS).

Since chaplains are called upon to counsel clients on what arguably may be the worst day of their lives, they require a deep practice and sense of connectedness in order to provide effective care without burning out in the process.

The SEUS process requires practitioners to self-monitor their psychological, social, cultural and spiritual response to situations in which they are dealing with trauma. It is, in a way, a form of mindfulness. By being aware of the power dynamics of the situation, their social context, and how they might be triggered or reactive, chaplains strive to depoliticize their interactions, provide effective support, and avoid being hurt themselves while being called upon to help others. This enables

them to be more fully present for their clients in the therapeutic relationship.

Having been given an outline of the basic practice of SEUS, conference participants were invited to watch a short video testimony by an indigenous residential school survivor describing the abuse she endured and the deficits with which it left her. Afterwards, participants were asked to share their feelings. Those ranged from anger, shame and white guilt, to helplessness—clearly difficult emotions for therapists to deal with in themselves.

Next, Dr. Bright posed the question: how can Buddhist chaplains understand, relate to, and practice the Safe and Effective Use of Self, when the illusory nature of self is a key tenet of Buddhism? Recognizing self as a fluid, constructed entity was one response. Agency, in the sense of encouraging clients to move away from a therapeutic paradigm of “being OK with” to some form of political action, was brought up next, but unfortunately there was not enough time in the program to allow for fuller discussion of these points.

Teaching the Buddhism of the Future, Not the Past

John Negru, Independent scholar, publisher at Sumeru Books

Sumeru is a Canadian Buddhist book publisher, with a focus on progressive critiques of traditional Buddhist views regarding environmental activism (among other topics). Negru’s teaching expertise is in the area of emerging technologies, design process, change management, and community development.

This presentation began with a technological design approach, looking at humans in the Anthropocene as designers who exercise fore-

sight and strategic planning, but who frequently have blind spots for unforeseen negative consequences.

This is the situation we face with our current biosphere emergency including climate change, mass extinctions, freshwater loss, eutrophication and other crises. We are at a global tipping point and our current societal structures seem unable to stop the momentum of our civilization's self-destructive behaviour. The consequence is a zeitgeist of collective anxiety and anticipatory grief. We hope to reach a new society—a permaculture—but the transition promises widespread trauma.

What will Buddhism look like and have to offer in this dystopian near-future? How does the Bodhisattva Vow manifest in such a situation?

Buddhist organizations and educational programs have the opportunity to model a new paradigm of harmonious interbeing, but have been spectacularly unsuccessful in rising to the challenge. Proponents of EcoDharma (David Loy) and the Green Practice Path (Stephanie Kaza) are still outliers, while the main thrust of Buddhist teaching remains narrowly anthropocentric.

For this reason, it is important for teachers of Buddhism in the academic context to acknowledge environmentally-focused trauma in themselves and their students, and to incorporate forward-thinking environmental activism into their Buddhist Studies curricula.

In the same way, Buddhist teachers must recognize and nurture the training and work of Buddhist chaplains, who venture out of the Dharma Centre or Academy to actively care for others in the wider world.

As Bhikkhu Bodhi suggests: while there will always be a tension for practitioners between the personal and the public, between insight

and engagement, we need to pivot away from an individual quest for liberation to recognition of our interdependent global systems, and take our practice to a collective level.

Participants were left with an invitation to contact Negru for a database of resources on the green practice path, and to contribute examples of inspiring environmental initiatives by Buddhist centres.

Technologies of the Meditative Self

David DiValerio, Associate Professor, Department of History, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Dr. DiValerio sought to historicize the mindfulness movement in the context of how it is presented within Western academic institutions.

Comments from the General Discussions

Each talk at the conference (not just this panel) was followed by lively discussion. Several themes arose repeatedly.

1. Vestiges of earlier colonial attitudes towards Buddhism, Buddhist practice, Buddhist art, the demographic backgrounds of students, pedagogy, and so on, still colour academic programs in Buddhist Studies today. De-colonialization requires ongoing effort.
2. The precarious employment and low pay for adjunct teaching staff at universities is a serious impediment for those entering the field. This is a widespread problem.

3. Buddhism and secular mindfulness remain inextricably linked in the public imagination, resulting often in a rather reductionist view of what Buddhism is all about.
4. Dukkha is ever-present; both students and teachers come from backgrounds that include trauma and may be in traumatic situations now. Trauma-informed pedagogy offers a broad set of tools to allow us to recognize and work skillfully with those individuals.