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Reflections on Teaching Graduate Seminars in Buddhism and East Asian Religions at McMaster University

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Abstract

This paper offers a critical reflection on the pedagogical practices and philosophical underpinnings of graduate-level instruction in Buddhist and East Asian religions. By examining nearly two decades of teaching experience at McMaster University, it delineates a consistent approach centred on the close reading of primary and secondary sources, the contextualisation of scholarly lineages, and the cultivation of collaborative inquiry. The discussion explores various seminar models—textual, thematic, and bibliographic—while addressing the challenges of interdisciplinary engagement and shifting student preferences towards empirical research. Ultimately, the article advocates for a culture of collective pedagogical reflection to enhance the mentorship of future scholars.

I'm very grateful for this opportunity to share some reflections on my experience with teaching graduate seminars. As academics, we often become so immersed in our research and publishing that we fail to take the time to reflect on and share our experiences in the teaching realm, particularly at the graduate level. However, I believe that this can be a valuable and necessary undertaking. Teaching graduate seminars is a uniquely rewarding yet challenging aspect of our roles as educators, and opening up this somewhat private domain to broader discussion may yield important insights. In many ways, this opportunity to reflect on my graduate teaching aligns with the impulses that led to the recent Buddhist Studies in Canada workshop that I organized at McMaster University. That gathering created a much-needed space for scholars in the field to come together, share their insights, and engage in substantive dialogues about the state of the discipline and its future directions. Similarly, by reflecting on my experiences teaching advanced seminars, I hope to contribute to a broader conversation about graduate pedagogy, mentorship, and the cultivation of the next generation of scholars in Buddhist Studies. Sharing these reflections serves several important purposes. First, it allows me to examine and refine my own teaching practices, drawing on the lessons learned over the years. Secondly, it provides a platform to highlight the unique challenges and joys of working with doctoral students, which can often be overshadowed by other aspects of university life. Finally, by opening up this aspect of my work, I aim to connect with other scholars who are navigating the complexities of graduate-level instruction, by offering some strategies and insights that may be applicable across diverse institutional and disciplinary contexts.

Ultimately, I believe that fostering a culture of openness and collective reflection around teaching, particularly in the rarefied realm of graduate education, can strengthen our field as a whole. By sharing our successes, struggles, and innovative pedagogical approaches, we can collectively enhance the training and mentorship of future scholars,

ensuring the vitality and continued advancement of Buddhist and East Asian religious studies.

After completing my PhD at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and spending four years as a faculty member at Arizona State University (ASU), in 2005 I was delighted to accept a position as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at McMaster University. This move represented a significant step forward in my academic journey, as it provided me with the opportunity to teach and mentor students at the doctoral level, a privilege I had not previously enjoyed at ASU. In my role as a professor of Buddhism and East Asian Religions at McMaster University, I have taught a wide range of graduate seminars designed to impart specialized knowledge as well as critical research skills. The topics of these seminars have spanned specific Buddhist and Daoist scriptures, genres of religious texts, themes within the religious traditions, and surveys of recent scholarship. Through these offerings, I aim not only to convey content but also to cultivate broader competencies in textual analysis, historical contextualization, theoretical frameworks, and academic discourse. Obviously, each individual seminar is a distinct intellectual journey in its own right, but I hope I can sketch out here some of the contours of my overall graduate teaching practice.

For me, the greatest pride and satisfaction has come when former students achieve significant milestones in their own academic careers. One of the MA students in my first seminar at McMaster University attained a remarkable accomplishment—securing a tenured position at UCLA in the same department where I myself pursued my doctoral studies. She now teaches the graduate seminars that I would have taken as a PhD student. This full-circle moment not only highlights the exceptional calibre of this particular scholar (Dr. Stephanie Balkwill) but also serves as a reminder of the profound influence that mentors can have on shaping the trajectories of their mentees. To witness one of my earliest graduate

students at McMaster ascend to the ranks of tenured faculty at my alma mater is a humbling reminder of the far-reaching impact educators can have on the next generation of scholars. The implications of this experience have reinforced my commitment to maintaining a consistent pedagogical approach in my graduate seminars, even as the specific content and topics evolve to reflect new research, emerging areas of inquiry, and the shifting interests of students. While the content and specific topics of my graduate seminars have evolved over the years in response to new directions in my own research, emerging areas of inquiry, and the different interests of students in them, the fundamental pedagogy and the structure of these courses have remained relatively consistent. My approach to teaching seminars was initially heavily influenced by the scholars who mentored me during my own graduate studies, including Tim Barrett at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), Ben Elman, Richard von Glahn, William Bodiford, and Robert Buswell at UCLA. My only significant break with the models of my mentors has been in expanding the range of materials I investigate. They are all primarily textual scholars, while I also look at material culture, images, inscriptions, and so on. This interdisciplinary approach has allowed me to delve into a wider range of sources and perspectives, enriching the seminar experience. I have also benefited greatly from being associated with the ACLS Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation programs in Buddhist Studies over the years. In dissertation workshops with Ho fellows, I've gained valuable insights and perspectives on the mechanics of graduate education. Additionally, I do chat a fair amount with my peers about my seminars on social media (mostly Twitter in the past, now mostly Bluesky). This ongoing exchange of ideas and experiences with colleagues and students has been instrumental in shaping my pedagogical approach.

One of the core practices that has endured in my seminars is the emphasis on close, critical reading of scholarship. Typically, the students and I engage with one substantial scholarly monograph or a selection of

seminal articles each week, a format that allows for an in-depth examination of the material. Occasionally, we may divide a particularly dense or lengthy text over two weeks to ensure comprehensive coverage and room to think. In order to foster an environment of collaborative inquiry, I assign one student each week to lead the discussion on the assigned reading. This not only encourages students to develop their skills in facilitating academic discourse but also, I hope, promotes a shared sense of ownership and investment in the seminar's intellectual journey.

An integral part of our seminar discussions always involves analyzing the academic backgrounds, intellectual influences, and methodological frameworks utilized by the scholars whose works we study. Typically I will ask "who is this scholar?" and we will spend some time discussing the author's current position, their academic training and their intellectual lineage. By contextualizing the specific books and articles we read within larger scholarly conversations and traditions, students develop a nuanced understanding of Religious Studies as a multidimensional discipline and the diversity of viewpoints that inform our comprehension of Buddhism and East Asian religions. They also come to understand how scholarly perspectives are formed and how they are transmitted across space and time.

In terms of my own preparation for each seminar, I spend time each week carefully reviewing the assigned texts, formulating at most perhaps three or four questions of my own, and identifying some key themes and arguments to highlight. I don't try to lead the discussion in a prescriptive manner or towards any predetermined conclusion. Rather, I aim to create a space for collaborative inquiry, where students feel empowered to share their own interpretations, raise critical questions, and engage in substantive intellectual exchanges. I take notes as we discuss the readings so that we can circle back to various themes as the seminar develops.

One category of seminars I offer focuses on close readings and in-depth examinations of particular scriptures central to Buddhism or Daoism (I prefer not to link directly to online examples of my seminar syllabi here, but they can be found online at academia.edu and other sites). For example, I have taught seminars dedicated to the *Lotus Sutra* (several times) and the *Nirvana Sutra* (only once so far), two highly influential Mahāyāna Buddhist texts. In these classes, the students and I work together in close textual study, exploring the scripture's contents, historical and cultural context. We consider the various interpretations of the scripture across traditions and time periods, and the far-reaching impacts these texts have had and continue to have on doctrine, practice, and religious communities. A key emphasis in these seminars is the development of skills in analyzing primary sources in their original languages. I work in literary Chinese, but students in the seminar often bring their own language training in Sanskrit or Tibetan or Japanese to bear on the materials. I emphasize close reading techniques, philological analysis, and the use of traditional commentaries and modern scholarly resources to unpack the nuances and complexities of these seminal texts. In the seminars themselves our readings are usually all in English, and the students who read Chinese work with me in a graduate course in literary Chinese that runs in parallel with the seminar. Through careful examination of key passages, students not only gain some familiarity with the content and teachings of the scriptures but also develop a nuanced understanding of the literary, rhetorical, and exegetical strategies employed by their authors or compilers. We explore the intertextual references, symbolic imagery, and narrative structures that contribute to the richness and enduring influence of these works. This multilayered engagement with the primary sources allows students to appreciate the texts as living, multidimensional documents, each with their own complex traditions of interpretation and transmission. In these seminars I try to situate the scriptures within their broader historical, social, and religious contexts, illuminating the circumstances of their composition, transmission, and reception across diverse

Buddhist communities. Students investigate how these texts were interpreted, appropriated, and transformed over time, shaping religious thought, practice, and institutions in profound ways.

Another category of seminars I offer investigates broader genres or categories of religious literature within Chinese Buddhist and Daoist traditions. For instance, I have taught seminars focused on one of my particular research interests, Chinese Buddhist apocrypha—texts composed in China but presented as authentic translations from Indic sources. These seminars introduce the multifaceted nature of these apocryphal writings, examining their distinctive characteristics, intended purposes, and the diverse ways in which they were and are received within East Asian Buddhist communities. We read apocryphal scriptures themselves (in translation) as well as secondary scholarship on them. The seminar focuses on how and why these texts were produced, how they were transmitted, and the complex process by which they were admitted to or excluded from Buddhist canons. We explore the complex motivations behind the creation of these apocryphal works, which range from filling perceived gaps in existing canonical literature to advancing particular doctrinal or sectarian agendas. Students investigate the literary strategies that their authors or compilers employed in order to lend an air of authenticity to these texts. We see how they emulated the stylistic conventions of genuine translations or invoked authoritative Indic sources in order to introduce new doctrines and practices. We examine the varied responses and attitudes toward these apocryphal writings within East Asian Buddhist communities, from enthusiastic embrace to outright rejection. The seminar offers specific examples of the broader themes of textual authority, canonicity, and the negotiation of orthodoxy and heterodoxy within religious traditions.

Complementing these explorations of Chinese Buddhist apocrypha, I also offer seminars dedicated to the vast and multifaceted Daoist

canon. In these classes, students are exposed to the rich corpus of Daoist scriptures, tracing their historical development, diverse literary forms, and the complex debates surrounding their authenticity, classification, and canonization processes. The papers that students write for this class don't just focus on historical issues, I have read some very interesting explorations of contemporary interpretations of Daoist literature. Dr. Marcus Evans's paper on Daoist literature in the mythos of the Wu Tang Clan is an example of one such study.

By engaging with these diverse textual traditions, I try to highlight the complex and interwoven relationships between religious literature, authority, and the construction of tradition within the East Asian religious landscape. The students develop critical skills in textual analysis, historical contextualization, and the ability to navigate the tangled web of intertextual references and symbolic imagery that characterizes this literature. The seminars provide a platform for students to engage with contemporary scholarship on these religious traditions, examining the theoretical and methodological approaches that shape the field of Buddhist Studies. My aim is to empower students to become discerning and critical readers of religious texts, and to equip them with the tools to navigate the complexities of the Buddhist and Daoist literary traditions with some nuance and skill.

In addition to seminars focused on close readings of specific scriptures or textual genres, I also offer thematic seminars that focus on particular concepts, practices, or phenomena. These courses allow for a deeper exploration of topics such as the bodhisattva ideal, material culture and Buddhist art, funerary rites and afterlife beliefs, and representations of health, healing, and medicine across various Chinese religious traditions. In these thematic seminars, we engage with a diverse array of sources—textual, artistic, archaeological—to gain a broader understanding of how religious ideas and practices manifest and intertwine. By

analyzing primary sources alongside secondary literature, students develop an appreciation for the complex ways in which religious concepts and practices are expressed across different contexts. For instance, in a seminar on the bodhisattva ideal, we examine Buddhist texts that elucidate the vows and practices of the bodhisattva, while also exploring representations of bodhisattva figures in sculpture, painting, and other visual media. This multidisciplinary approach highlights the bodhisattva ideal as a religious concept that transcends textual boundaries and manifests in diverse cultural expressions. Similarly, I offered a seminar on funerary rites and afterlife beliefs that engaged with a range of sources, including ritual texts, tomb inscriptions, archaeological evidence from burial sites, and artistic depictions of the afterlife. The students and I were able to gain insights into the complex relationships between religious ideas, mortuary practices, and cultural expressions of death and mourning.

To prepare PhD students for their comprehensive examinations, I regularly lead seminars surveying recent publications in Buddhist Studies and East Asian Religions. In these courses I curate a sampling of the latest research within the field, and encourage students to evaluate critically the existing scholarship and to situate their own research interests within broader academic conversations. By engaging with the latest publications, graduate students develop confidence in understanding how our field is growing and evolving. They can then see how their own scholarly endeavours contribute to the ongoing discourse within Buddhist Studies.

While the majority of students enrolled in my graduate seminars are in Asian Religions, I have also had the privilege of welcoming students from other disciplines and academic backgrounds. This interdisciplinary dynamic definitely enriches our classroom discussions and fosters a cross-pollination of ideas and perspectives. Occasionally, students from fields such as History, Anthropology, or Comparative Literature join my seminars, bringing their particular methodological approaches and interests

to our exploration of Buddhist and East Asian religious traditions. Their fresh perspectives often challenge our assumptions and open up new avenues of inquiry. For many years now a retired art historian specializing in Western art has audited my seminars as an active participant. Despite their expertise lying outside the realm of Asian religions, this individual's keen eye for visual analysis and their deep understanding of the world of artist and patron have proven invaluable in our discussions of material culture, Buddhist art, and the intersection of religious thought and artistic expression. Moreover, having this deep source of knowledge and intellectual inquiry in the seminar has allowed students to appreciate the immediate benefits of conversations between disciplines and to recognize the complex interplay between textual sources, material culture, and ideas.

Recognizing the value of interdisciplinary perspectives, I have also designed seminars that examine Chinese religions through the lens of literature and performance. By analyzing narratives, poetry, drama, and ritual performances, students gain insights into the diverse cultural manifestations and lived experiences of religious traditions beyond strictly doctrinal or institutional contexts.

Across these varied seminar topics, I employ a range of learning activities to foster active learning and skill development. Discussions, student-led presentations, critical response papers, as well as research papers are integral components. These are intended to allow students opportunities to engage deeply with primary and secondary sources, to articulate nuanced analyses, and to hone their academic writing and communication abilities. Written assignments in particular play a crucial role in developing students' ability to articulate complex ideas, synthesize diverse sources, and develop original arguments that advance scholarly discourse. While I embrace innovative pedagogical approaches (especially in the undergraduate classroom), I maintain a commitment to traditional writing exercises that foster substantive research and analytical skills. I

require students to produce a substantial research paper, typically spanning 20-25 pages. This assignment challenges students to formulate a compelling research question, to engage at length with primary and secondary sources, to construct a well-reasoned argument, and to situate their analysis within broader scholarly conversations. The process of conceptualizing and crafting such a paper reinforces their knowledge of important content while honing their abilities in critical thinking, and academic writing.

In addition to the research paper, I assign weekly responses for seminars that explore the current state of the field. These shorter assignments require students to engage with assigned readings, distill key arguments, and articulate their own perspectives. These responses are posted to the course learning management system, so that students can read and learn from each other's insights. By integrating both extended research projects and focused weekly writing exercises, I try to strike a balance between depth and breadth, challenging students to develop their voices as scholars while also exposing them to the latest debates and discourses within the field.

I have not said much here about how my seminars are received by students because I find that hard to generalize. I have noticed that students often come to Buddhist Studies with evolving ideas about what the field entails. While it is challenging to track these changes in attitude precisely, there seems to be a growing preference for empirical studies over open-ended, theoretical inquiries. Many students express a desire for concrete evidence and historical context, and can be reluctant to engage in more abstract or philosophical discussions. This is not universally true by any means and I can think of several notable exceptions, but it is a pattern I have observed in recent years. In response, I have tried to adapt my seminars to incorporate a balance of both approaches. I strive to provide a solid foundation in empirical research while also creating space for

critical analysis and theoretical exploration. This allows students to develop a comprehensive understanding of Buddhist Studies, appreciating both its historical grounding and its potential for broader intellectual engagement.

My teaching has evolved significantly since joining McMaster in 2005, shaped by my own academic growth, by curricular innovations, and the changing needs and interests of students. Many of my former students have themselves become accomplished teachers and scholars, a testament to the enduring impact of our collaborative intellectual journey. As I continue to refine my pedagogical approaches, I remain committed to providing a rigorous yet supportive learning environment that empowers students to contribute meaningfully to the ever-expanding field of Buddhist Studies.

The editor of this special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies* asked me to offer some advice to students (my own and those whom I have never taught) who are teaching or preparing to teach in post-secondary settings. Here are five points that I would like to pass on. 1) Embrace an expansive and inclusive approach to the field. Do not limit yourself to traditional boundaries. Take joy in exploring interdisciplinary connections, engage with a wide range of materials, and consider diverse perspectives. This will enrich your teaching and create a more engaging learning experience for your students. 2) Connect to your passion for learning and critical inquiry. Your enthusiasm will be contagious, inspiring your students to immerse themselves in the subject matter. Encourage them to question assumptions, challenge traditional interpretations, and develop their own critical thinking skills. 3) Be mindful of the evolving needs and expectations of your students. The field of Buddhist Studies is constantly changing, and so are the interests and perspectives of your students. Stay informed about current trends, adapt your teaching methods accordingly, and create a learning environment that fosters intellectual

curiosity and open dialogue. 4) Remember that teaching is an ethical practice. Approach your teaching with a sense of responsibility and care. Be mindful of the impact you have on your students, foster a supportive and inclusive learning environment, and strive to create a community of learners who are committed to intellectual growth and ethical engagement with the world. 5) Never stop learning and growing as a scholar and a teacher. Engage in ongoing professional development, seek out mentorship opportunities, and remain open to new ideas and perspectives. Your own intellectual journey will inspire your students and enrich your teaching.

Notes on the Contributor

James A. Benn is Professor of Buddhism and East Asian Religions at McMaster University, where he has taught and mentored doctoral students since 2005. He previously served on the faculty at Arizona State University after completing his PhD at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). His research specialisations include the cultural and religious history of tea in China and the study of Chinese Buddhist apocrypha.

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