

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<https://thecjbs.org/>

Number 20, 2025/2026

Editor's Introduction: Buddhist Studies Pedagogy in Contemporary Canada—A Snapshot of the State of the Field

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Editor's Introduction: Buddhist Studies Pedagogy in Contemporary Canada—A Snapshot of the State of the Field

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Abstract

This article introduces our special issue: *Buddhist Studies in the Post-Secondary Classroom in 2026: Perspectives from Canada and Beyond*. My introduction has two primary aims. First, I provide a data-driven exploration of the state of postsecondary Buddhist Studies pedagogy in Canada, in 2026, using university course calendars, class schedules, and program websites to assess the ways our discipline is being taught (and by whom). Second, in response to both these data and my own experiences as an educator, I reflect on what we (as teachers) can do to respond adequately to the challenges being faced by students at this time.

Introduction

It is a difficult time to be alive. I say this while recognizing the privilege of my position: I have a good job, I have various structural advantages on my side (by virtue of being white and presenting as male), and I am at least reasonably healthy at present (though both mental and physical health challenges have dogged me over the last few years). But even to one who has been the unworthy recipient of these many boons, many days leave me feeling sandblasted, my emotional and psychological armor eroded so thoroughly that everything cuts, everything wounds. These sentiments were echoed, albeit in a more taciturn manner, by a colleague at the 2024 “Buddhist Studies in Canada” Workshop,¹ who—when asked to describe his current experience as a Buddhist Studies scholar teaching in a Canadian university—glumly offered a one-word reply: “*dukkha*.”

And things have gotten worse since that workshop. On the academic side, several Canadian religious studies programs have been squeezed or outright shuttered (including the one described in Frances Garrett’s contribution to this issue), further diminishing our small coterie. More broadly, we have seen rapacious tech companies—through systematic intellectual property theft on an unprecedented scale—unleashing generative AI models that threaten to critically undercut not only the types of skills that we, as humanistic scholars, have valued and trained our students to value for centuries, but also to destabilize (and ultimately erode) the pool of jobs available to those who graduate from our programs.² Turning our gaze outward, we confront a further cavalcade of

¹ May 11–12, 2024. Hosted at McMaster University and sponsored by the McMaster Center for Buddhist Studies and BDK Canada.

² According to a recent *Forbes* article, “93% of American jobs are at least partially at risk of being taken over by AI.” John Koetsier, “Report: Jobs That Are Most and Least Impacted by AI,” *Forbes*, February 25, 2026.

horrors: wars and genocides, economies upended by a generational cost-of-living crisis while balanced precariously atop tech utopian AI and crypto bubbles, and the United States (our formerly reliable, if entitled and a bit boorish, neighbor to the south) sliding into fascism and oligarchic crony capitalism. And, behind it all, we see annual global temperatures creeping higher and higher, a literal fact and a queasily apt metaphor for the pressure-cooker in which we find ourselves trapped.

As much as these issues weigh on me, I also see them reflected in the wan faces of students, who must run a daily gauntlet of these distressing realities while also contending with their increasingly uncertain futures. These challenges are exacerbated by profound feelings of social anxiety and dislocation, likely prompted by losing years of valuable human habituation time in secondary school due to COVID lockdowns, which in turn cause many to fall victim to the precision-tuned seductions of smartphone applications whose primary function is to distract the user and reward “engagement”: an ersatz facsimile of sociality and human contact.³

What are we doing here? What is its value (for ourselves and our increasingly bedraggled students)? What does it mean to teach about Buddhism in 2026?

* * *

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnkoetsier/2026/02/25/report-jobs-that-are-most-and-least-impacted-by-ai/>.

³ For popular treatments of the so-called “attention economy” and its devastating, dehumanizing effect upon the human psyche, see Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Melville House, 2019); Chris Hayes, *The Sirens' Call: How Attention Became the World's Most Endangered Resource* (Penguin, 2025); D. Graham Burnett and the Friends of Attention (eds.), *Attensity! A Manifesto of the Attention Liberation Movement* (Princeton University Press, 2026).

As the foregoing paragraphs have foreshadowed, this introduction is a bit of a chimera: a zoological oddity of tones and subjects grafted cheek to jowl: part reflection, part research article, and part quantitative assessment of the state of Buddhist Studies pedagogy in 21st century Canada (no, really!). This peculiar structure is informed by the present issue's troubled birthing process. While I solicited the original contributions in 2024, I am only managing to meld together the remainders of various abortive attempts to express my ideas on these complex issues now, in the spring of 2026. This process has been exacerbated by various physical and mental health struggles during the last two years, which—if nothing else—means that I find myself especially empathetic to students who are in similar straits.⁴ This need for empathy will be addressed in greater detail below, as well as in Pierce Salguero's reflective conclusion to this issue. This also explains why the contributors to this issue rarely comment on the transformative (and almost unilaterally negative) effect that AI has had on teaching and learning. It is not that the authors included herein somehow ignored the 800-pound digital gorilla in the room, but rather that the true horrors of rampant AI use were less acute when their pieces were written.

In brief, the plan for the remainder of this piece is as follows: first, I will report the results of my survey of Buddhist Studies teaching in our country, reviewing the relevant course offerings and faculty complements of each university in Canada. This will, I hope, provide a useful perspective on the current state of our field as a pedagogical enterprise, and will provide some data points that we, as members of an academic guild, can use when in conversation with students, university administrators,

⁴ My enduring thanks to Tony Scott, who gracefully stepped in as a co-editor to the issue and helped shepherd it to completion.

and interested members of the general public.⁵ Next, I will explore some persistent challenges and issues that I observed in reviewing these course offerings, and offer some suggestions for ways that we can address them in our classrooms more robustly. While I will be drawing from my own teaching experience here, this is in no way because I see myself as some sort of paragon; instead, it is simply the same impulse that drives the drunk from the old joke to search for his keys under the streetlight instead of in the dark alley where he lost them—"the light is better over *here*." I know which problems have arisen in my own teaching, which interventions have succeeded and failed, and the reasoning that has guided these pedagogical choices. I will, of course, also use this section to highlight links to the various thoughtful contributions to this volume.

Part One: How Buddhism is Taught in Canadian Universities in 2025/2026

As much as I would be fascinated to see a survey of Buddhism as practiced in contemporary Canada, this paper has a more restricted scope.⁶ Specifically, it seeks to provide a focused, data-driven snapshot of postsecondary Buddhist Studies pedagogy in our nation's universities. This focus was

⁵ On the potential utility of seeing religious studies as an academic guild, see Laurie L. Patton, "2019 AAR Presidential Address: 'And Are We Not of Interest to Each Other?' A Blueprint for the Public Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 88 no. 3 (2020): 639–63. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfaa044>.

⁶ For a useful (and inspiring) examination of Canadian Buddhism, see John S. Harding, Victor Sōgen Hori, and Alexander Soucy, eds., *Wild Geese: Buddhism in Canada* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010). For overviews of the current state of Buddhist studies in America and at the AAR, respectively, see Ann Gleig and Amy Langenberg, "Buddhist Studies in the United States: New Turns and Future Directions," *Religious Studies Review* 50, no. 1 (2024): 97–103, <https://doi.org/10.1111/rsr.17058>; José I. Cabezón, "2020 AAR Presidential Address: The Study of Buddhism and the AAR," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 89, no. 3 (2021): 793–818. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfab079>.

driven by innumerable conversations with prospective students, university administrators, and external program evaluators (among others), in which I was asked probing questions about what we do in the classroom and the value that we provide to the university as a whole. While I could answer such questions for myself, these discussions made me realize that I lacked a clear sense of how we—as a disciplinary cohort—were responding to them in our uncertain moment and, more generally, what the actual state of Buddhist Studies looked like at Canadian universities at the end of the first quarter of the twenty-first century. As such, I decided to systematically review the course offerings of all Canadian universities and see how, whether, and the extent to which, courses related to Buddhism are being taught, as I hoped that doing so would shed light on where we are—and where we are going—as a discipline. It is my hope that these data will provide some insights that we can all use when we find ourselves in such conversation in the future.

Materials and Methods

Here are the parameters and procedures that I employed in carrying out this analysis. As a starting point, I decided to restrict the scope of the study to all universities covered in the Maclean's List (fifty in total).⁷ While this may result in missing some small community colleges or vocational schools (as well as explicitly faith-based institutions), this seemed like a reasonable starting point. To assemble a composite picture of the Buddhism-related courses available to our nation's students, I drew on two

⁷ While Maclean's breaks this list of fifty schools down into three subcategories (medical/doctoral (15), primarily undergrad (20), and comprehensive (15)), I figured that these divisions were not terribly germane to my analysis. "2026 University Rankings," *Macleans*, last accessed April, 2026, <https://macleans.ca/education/university-rankings/>.

resources: posted calendars and course schedules for the 2025/2026 school year.⁸ Each of these sources are useful for their own reasons: calendars because they provide the “best-case,” most intentional and rationalized picture of a given program, including all of the courses that are regularly taught; and schedules because they show the underlying reality of which courses are actually being offered. If nothing else, this process highlighted the fact that *many* universities have abysmal websites: rife with missing information, broken links, and unsearchable PDFs. In cases where the requisite information about current course offerings was missing (or was obfuscated behind authentication systems requiring one to be a faculty-member or student), I emailed the relevant administrators for details. I will note the occasional cases where lacunae remain (e.g., due to not having received email responses to my queries).

My search protocol was simple: I would open the PDF of the calendar (or use the website search function, if a PDF hadn't been posted) and search for “buddh” (which would catch “Buddha”, “Buddhism,” and “Buddhist”). I would then individually search for these three terms as well, in case the search function implicitly defaulted to only searching full keywords. (Of course, I also searched for “Bouddhisme” and cognates when checking the calendars of bilingual/French institutions.)

For the purposes of the analysis, I catalogued any course whose description mentioned any of these keywords under the heading “**Buddhism-related**.” For a course to be categorized as “**Buddhism-focused**,” in contrast, “Buddhism” needed to be the primary topic, as far as could be discerned based on the description. As an example, I categorized McGill's “Hinduism and Buddhism” and UBC's “Religion in South Asia” as “Buddhism-related” but not “Buddhism-focused.” While this categorization scheme had the advantage of expediency, I will admit that it created a

⁸ Given the health-related delays in the completion of this issue, I ended up having to scrap my incomplete survey of the 2024/2025 academic year and start again.

slightly too narrow net (for a few reasons): first, most programs do not post the contents of upper-year thematic courses. As such, if a fourth-year seminar entitled “Religion and Gender” happened to focus on Zen nuns in Fall of 2025 (for example), I will have missed it. Likewise, even if a course’s title/description implies that Buddhism would have been covered (e.g., Mount Allison’s “Gender Issues in Eastern Religions”), I did not include it if the calendar description did not explicitly mention Buddhism. I recognize that focusing on the term “Buddhism” (and cognates) could inadvertently privilege religious studies, as it might miss courses from disciplines with different foci (e.g., an Anthropology course on “Life in Sri Lanka”). That said, if a course description fails to mention Buddhism by name, it seems reasonable to assume that it would not be a major focus of instruction.

To derive the information on faculty complements, I simply reviewed the department/program websites for all units offering **Buddhism-related** and **Buddhism-focused** courses. Once there, I reviewed the posted research interests/teaching foci of all faculty members, again searching for the terms “Buddhism” and “Buddhist.” In so doing, I did *not* include sessional or contract instructors in this analysis because many universities do not list their contingent (i.e., precariously employed) faculty on their websites, and even those who do very rarely list their specialties. Likewise, given that my primary interest was in the extent to which Canadian universities are continuing to fund professorships for faculty members whose work incorporates Buddhism as subject matter, I also did not include adjuncts or emerita in my counts.

Results

The results of this analysis can be framed as a response to an overarching rhetorical question: namely, if a postsecondary student in Canada is interested in Buddhism, where will they be able to learn about the subject and through which disciplinary lenses? In other words, which universities and university departments offer such courses?

Intriguingly, especially given the way that our research and teaching has been belittled by small-minded bureaucrats, the vast majority of Canadian universities offer students at least one opportunity to learn about Buddhism. Specifically, of the fifty institutions surveyed, all but three (47) offered at least one **Buddhism-related** course, which bespeaks a reasonable degree of interest in the topic across the nation's student body. Surprising no one, the most common purveyor of such courses remains religious studies programs, in all of their various guises (religion, religious studies, study of religion, religion and culture, etc.). Slightly more surprising was the extent to which philosophy programs have begun to cover Buddhist thought, perhaps in response to the scathing critiques of their parochialism and Euro-American chauvinism that have risen in prominence in the last ten years.⁹ In addition, a reasonable number of History, Asian Studies, and Art History programs also offered at least one Buddhism-related course as well. The full results can be seen below (Fig. 1). Since my primary interest here is the range of programs that see some value in teaching Buddhism, I have double-counted cross-listed courses.

⁹ See, for example, Bryan W. van Norden, *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017). As he argues, following the *New York Times* op-ed he co-authored with Jay Garfield, the parochial course offerings in the vast majority of philosophy programs suggest that they should be renamed departments of "Anglo-European Philosophy" to more accurately reflect their partial coverage of human intellectual history (pp. 8-9, 34-35).

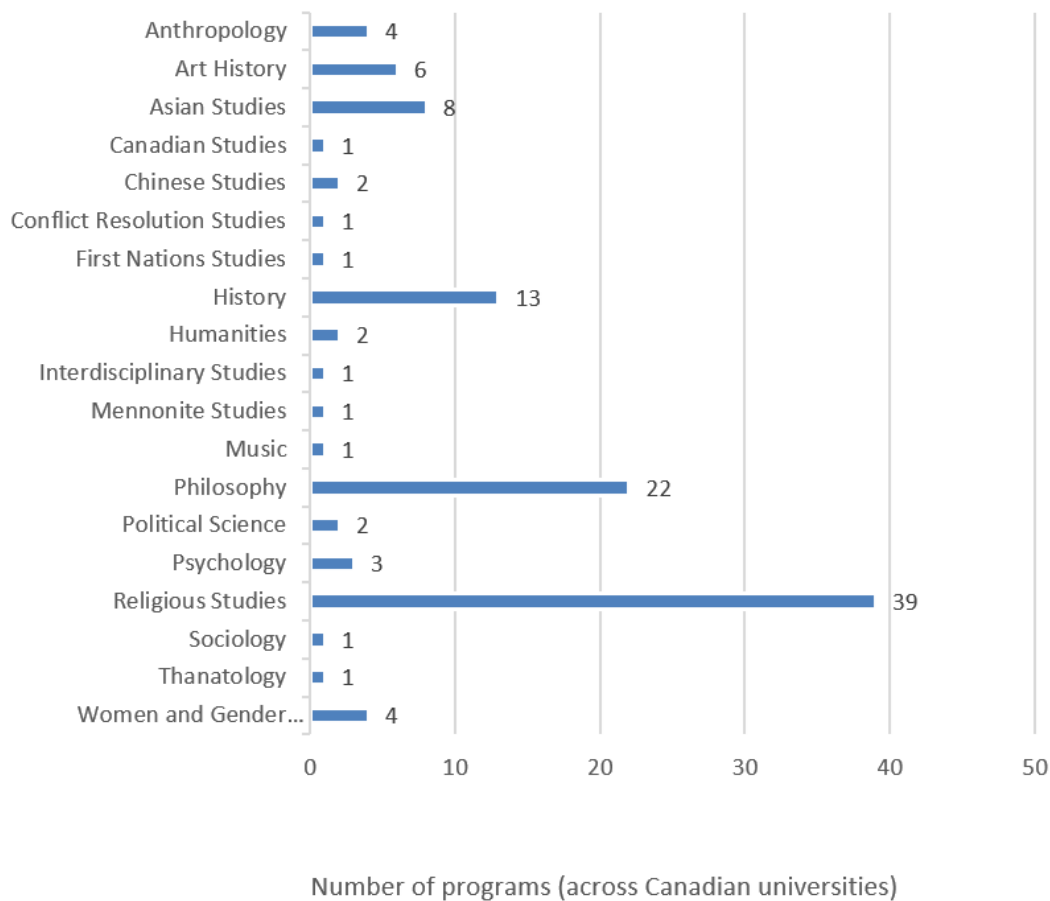


Figure 1 University Programs in Canada offering “**Buddhism-Related**” Courses

While I was mildly heartened to see the ubiquity of Buddhism-related courses in our country’s schools, I have to admit that—as a Religion scholar—I was a little surprised to see that only 78% of Canadian universities (39/50) have religious studies programs (or at least programs large enough to offer at least one class on Buddhism). These numbers seem to reflect the grim reality of program consolidations and closures that have been haunting the humanities and social sciences for the last few decades, in response to (increasingly bloated) administrations attempting to “increase efficiency” by cutting small units. As I have argued elsewhere,

however, I think that we, as disciplinary scholars, are also partially to blame for this slide into obscurity, given that many of us eschew collaboration and outreach in favour of labouring quietly within increasingly narrow sub-disciplinary specializations.¹⁰ If we are not willing to serve as public intellectuals, going so far as to poohpooh even the notion that “religion” is a meaningful term of analysis, how can we justify our continued existence as a discipline?¹¹

While the previous chart highlights the diversity of programs that offer at least one course related to Buddhism, this is obviously only part of the story. Specifically, those data points spoke to the seeming appeal of the subject in general, given the range of disciplines that see fit to teach about Buddhism in at least some capacity. We see a marked contrast, however, when considering the total numbers of listed courses by discipline (see Fig. 2). When reviewing these numbers, I was first struck by the paucity of philosophy courses on offer. Though 22 different philosophy programs offer a Buddhism-related course, there are only 37 such philosophy courses listed in total, meaning that—on average—an interested student could take 1.7 classes in any given program. If nothing else, this shows that Canadian philosophy programs have decided to trade in their prior parochialism for the lesser academic sin of tokenism, offering their students but a brief sojourn in other traditions of thought before compelling their return to the output of classical (Greek/Roman) and Euro-American thinkers. Second, it is clear that the majority of Buddhist studies teaching in Canada is taking place in religious studies programs, which provide the

¹⁰ Christopher Jensen, “Approaching the Freedom Convoy: Intra-Disciplinary Reflections on Religion Scholars as Public Intellectuals,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 54, no. 1 (2025): 3–18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00084298241284583>.

¹¹ Notably, this is a longstanding issue, with Kimberley Patton drawing our disciplinary attention to it as early as 1997. Kimberley Patton, “‘Stumbling along between the Immen-sities’: Reflections on Teaching in the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, no. 4 (1997): 831–49.

academic homes for over 60% of all Buddhism-related courses being offered (62%–268/429). Moreover, and in contrast to the tokenistic coverage the topic receives in philosophy programs, these numbers suggest that the average Religion program offers a more respectable average of 6.9 Buddhism-related courses. However, it should be noted that these numbers are skewed by the enormous number of courses hosted by universities with a strong research concentration in the field (as seen in Fig. 3).

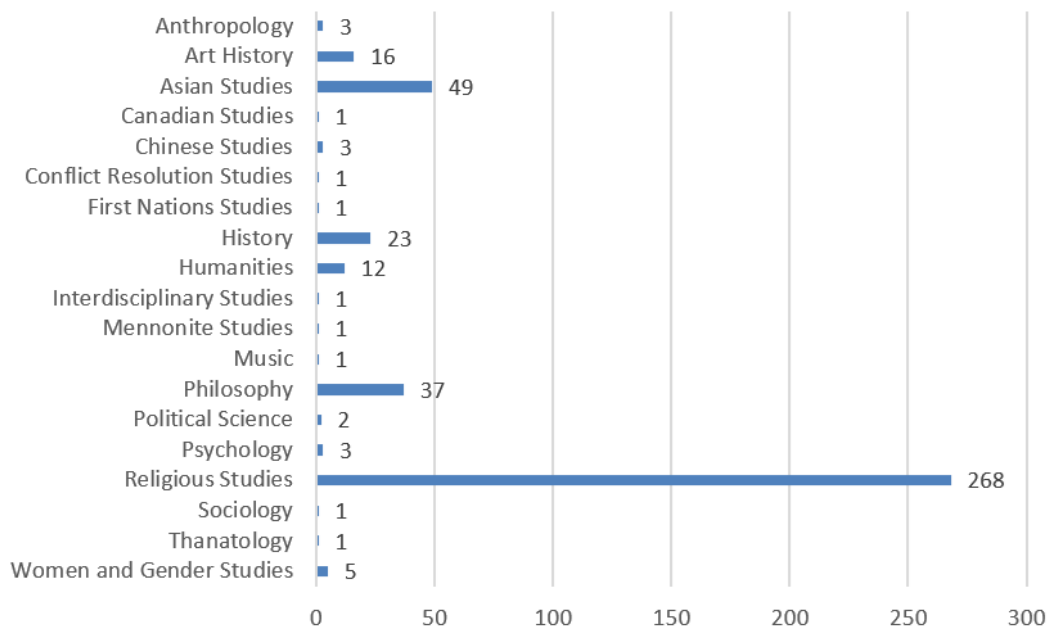


Figure 2 Total **Buddhism-Related** Courses in Canadian University Calendars (by Program)

To explore this point, we next consider the distribution of Buddhist studies-related courses across the Canadian undergraduate landscape. Of the fifty universities surveyed, the calendars of only ten of them list fifteen or more Buddhism-related courses, with only four listing twenty or more. In fact, despite being but a single institution (one of fifty under consideration), the University of Toronto's offerings alone

represent more than 8% of all such courses being advertised in Canada at present (36 courses total).¹² This number includes courses from the Buddhism, Psychology, and Mental Health minor (BPM), which admitted over 1000 students in the past year, in spite of the fact that the administration is no longer allowing students to enroll in the minor. (See Frances Garrett's contribution to this volume for a detailed outline of the BPM program, including its innovative teaching methods, its positive impact on students, and its currently uncertain fate). More striking, however, is the disparity between courses that clearly treat Buddhism as one topic among many, such as the oft-derided "World Religions" course and comparative/thematic courses, and those whose subject matter focuses explicitly on Buddhism in some substantive capacity.¹³ As we can see here, approximately half of the Canadian universities surveyed (24/50) offer either zero or one course that focuses on Buddhism; this singular course, when offered, is almost unilaterally the "Intro to Buddhism." For undergrad students with an abiding interest in the topic, there are only ten Canadian universities where they could develop even a reasonable specialization in the topic, here defined as taking five or more relevant courses: University of Toronto (22), UBC (11), University of Manitoba (8), University of Calgary

¹² It should be noted that the University of Winnipeg's and York's numbers are inflated here, due to the fact that they cross-list *all* relevant courses, whether between Religion and East Asian Studies (10/13) in the case of Winnipeg or Religion and Humanities (7/7) for York. That said, my method (outlined above) means that I must include these double counts for the sake of consistency, given that these courses are included twice in the calendar. Many other programs also cross-listed courses, but none this extensively.

U. of T. is one of the universities in Canada with multiple campuses. I believe I have correctly accounted for courses offered at each, though it is possible that some were missed, depending on how the course schedules were administered.

¹³ For an overview of the various critiques of this paradigm, see the essays included in Christopher R. Cotter and David G. Robertson, eds., *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies* (Routledge, 2016).

(8), University of Winnipeg (7), York (7), McGill (7), McMaster (7), Western (6), and University of Alberta (5).

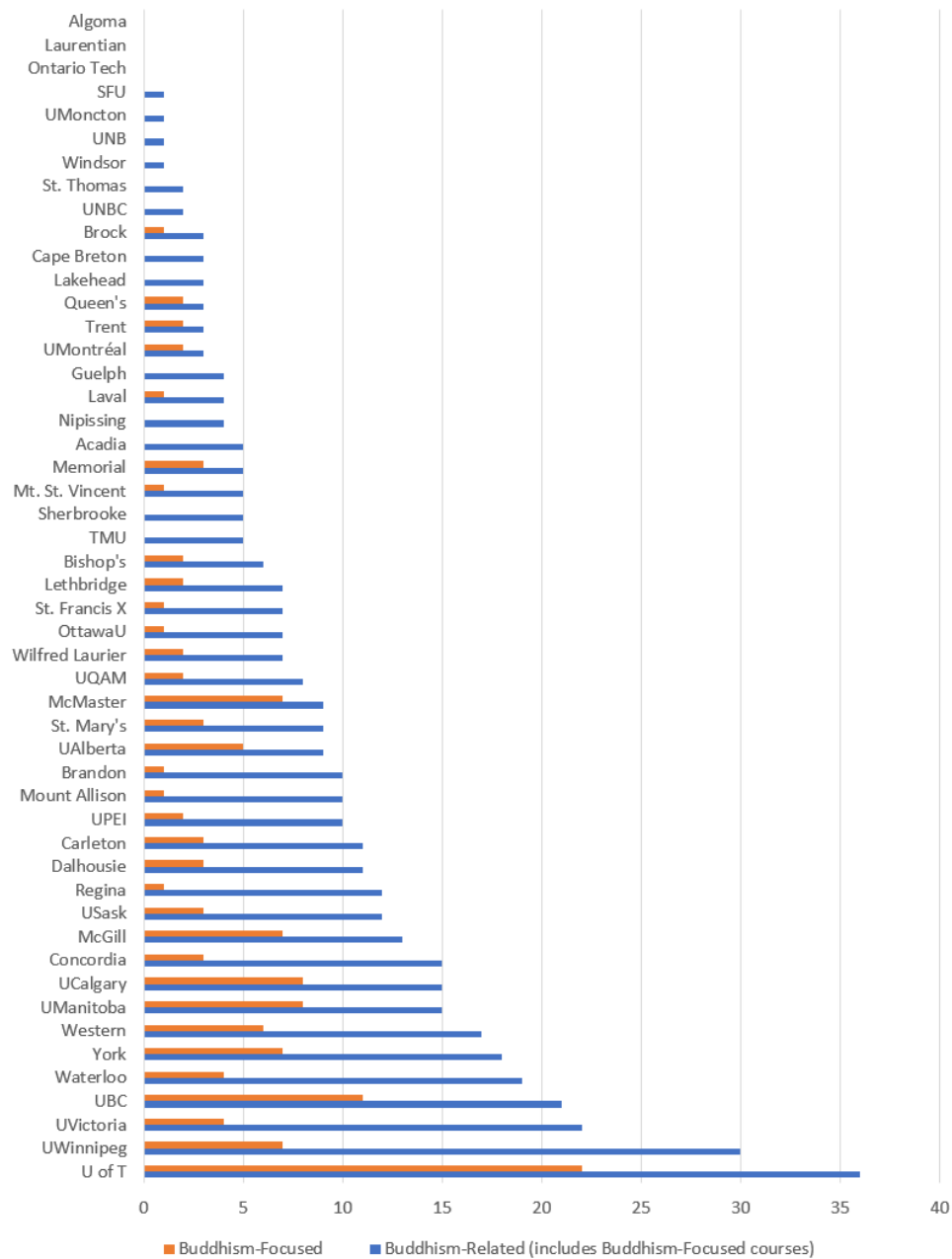


Figure 3 Total “Buddhism-Related” and “Buddhism-Focused” Courses (by University Calendar)

While these numbers are already a little dire, I have enough experience on curriculum committees to know they almost certainly overrepresent the actual quantity of Buddhism-related courses being offered, given that university course calendars are often geological documents, concealing a stratigraphy of moribund courses taught by professors who have departed either their programs or this mortal coil years ago. For a more realistic picture of the current state of the discipline as taught, I returned to the morass of university and program websites and catalogued all of the courses related to Buddhism being offered in the current academic year (2025–2026). Since course scheduling information is not always publicly available, I also occasionally needed to email program administrators/faculty. Even so, there are a few gaps in the data resulting from unanswered emails.¹⁴ While Figure 3 surely overrepresents the data (especially given the double-counting of cross-listed courses), Figure 4 does the inverse for obvious reasons: no program offers every course in a given calendar year. Likewise, the vicissitudes of academic life, such as administrative course releases and sabbaticals, obviously impact any given program's ability to offer specific courses. For more reliable data, it would be necessary to extend this analysis out diachronically, as this would greatly increase the ratio of signal to noise and allow us to comment on larger-scale trends. Given the amount of time that my poor collaborators have already been waiting for this issue to be published, however, that sort of analysis will have to wait.

¹⁴ I did not hear back from the following institutions: Sherbrooke (RS), Université de Montréal (RS, Philosophy), UQAM (History), TMU (Music).

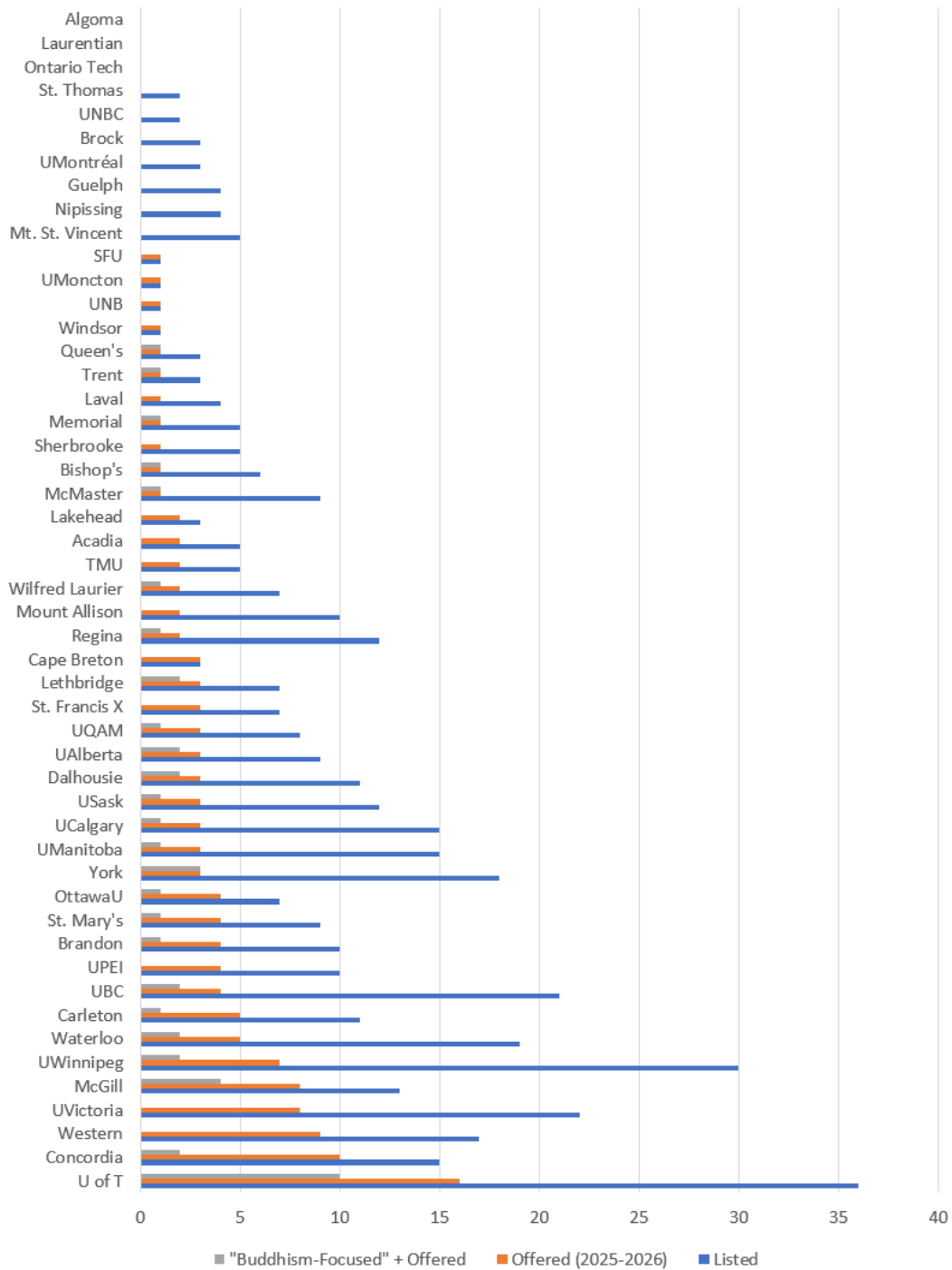


Figure 4 Courses Listed and Offered in 2025–2026 Academic Year (by University)

As we can see in Figure 4, ten universities (20% of the sample) are not offering a single Buddhism-related course in the 2025–2026 academic year. More worryingly, only 25 universities (a mere 50%) are offering at least one Buddhism-focused course, and only three (York, McGill, and U. of T.) are offering three or more such courses.¹⁵ Though I hope I am wrong about this, these dire numbers seem to be an ill omen for the future of Buddhist studies in Canada. If our students only have access to superficial courses, treating Buddhism as a single unit or comparand, where and how will they develop the deeper, more sustained interest that drove us all to dedicate our professional lives to this discipline? More broadly, why is there such a gulf between the idealized world of course calendars and the reality of course scheduling? Why are only a third of Buddhism-related and Buddhism-focused courses on the books at our Canadian institutions (141/429 and 46/138, respectively) being offered? Some part of the answer may have to do with program cuts and declining enrollments in the social sciences and humanities, but I believe that another part of the problem is related to staffing (or the lack thereof).

In Table 1, I summarize my findings related to the faculty complements in units that offer Buddhism-related courses.¹⁶ As a minor concession to the workload associated with this task, I only analyzed the faculty make-up in programs that offered at least one Buddhism-focused or three Buddhism-related courses, as it seems reasonable to assume that any programs that list fewer than this number of courses likely lack a Buddhist studies scholar on staff. With this caveat, we can now review the results.

¹⁵ This is, once again, with the proviso that my tabulation schema means that I will have missed any upper-year special topics courses whose descriptions do not include “Buddhism” (or cognates).

¹⁶ I would here like to give credit to the dearly departed Michael Ium, who inspired me to look into this issue with a series of probing questions about who is currently teaching Buddhism-related courses, which he offered during a preliminary presentation of these findings.

Table 1: Faculty Complements + Members with a Listed Research Interest in Buddhism

<i>Program</i>	<i>FT Faculty</i>	<i>Buddhism</i>	<i>Rank(s)</i>
Bishop's-Psychology	11	1	Professor
Bishop's-Religion, Society, and Culture	2	0	
Brandon-Religion	4	0	
Brock-Philosophy	8	2	Professor, Associate
Carleton-Religion	10	1	Associate
Concordia-Religions and Cultures	12	2	Associate, Professor
Dalhousie-Chinese Studies	4	0	
Dalhousie-Religious Studies	10	1	Associate
Laval-théologie et de sciences religieuses	20	0	
McGill-School of Religious Studies	21	3	Assistant, Associate, Associate
McMaster-Society, Culture, and Religion	11	3	Associate, Associate, Professor
Memorial-Philosophy	9	0.5	Assistant
Memorial-Religion and Culture	8	0.5	(Cross-appointment)
Montréal-Département de philosophie	21	1	Professor
Montréal-Études religieuses	13	2	Professor, Associate
Mount A-Religious Studies	4	1	Associate
Mt. St. Vincent-Philosophy and Religious Studies	4	0	
Queen's-School of Religion	8	0	

Sherbrooke-Centre d'études du religieux contemporain	16	0	
St. Francis X-Religious Studies	7	1	Assistant
St. Mary's-Study of Religion	6	1	Professor
TMU-Religion	0	0	(No discrete faculty?)
Trent-Anthropology	14	1	Associate
Trent-Philosophy	9	0	
U of T-East Asian Studies	26	1	Assistant
U of T-Philosophy	66	2	Professor, Associate
U of T-Study of Religion	45	4	Associate, Associate, Assistant, Assistant
UAlberta-East Asian Studies	12	0.5	Associate
UAlberta-History, Classics, and Religion	36	0.5	(Cross-appointment)
UBC-Asian Studies	70	2	Professor, Associate
UCalgary-Art and Art History	14	0	
UCalgary-Classics and Religion	18	2	Professor, Professor
ULethbridge-History and Religion	3	1	Professor
UManitoba-Religion	9	1	Associate
UOttawa-Classics and Religious Studies	15	1	Associate
UPEI-Psychology	17	0	
UPEI-Religious Studies	5	1	Professor
UQAM-Sciences des religions	13	2	Professor, Professor
URegina-Gender, Religion, and Critical	8	1	Associate

Studies			
USask-History	18	1	Associate
USask-Religious Studies	3	0	
UVictoria-Art History	12	1	Associate
UVictoria-Pacific and Asian Studies	14	2	Associate, Professor
UWaterloo-East Asian Studies	5	0.5	Professor
UWaterloo-Religion, Society, and Culture	10	0.5	(Cross-appointment)
UWinnipeg-Religion and Culture / EALC	9	1	Assistant
Western-Philosophy	22	0	
Western [Huron]-Chinese	3	0	
Western [King's College]-Religious Studies	7	1	Professor
Wilfred Laurier-Religion and Culture	11	1	Associate
York-Humanities	68	1	Associate
Total	771	49	

First, I was a little surprised by the dearth of such positions in Canada. Despite always being aware that this work is akin to membership in an exclusive yet somehow also unfashionable club, it was still surprising to see that there are only forty-nine of us in total: barely a large house party. In terms of distribution, the majority have found work in our country's variously named Religion programs (32.5/49 [66%]), as can be seen in Fig. 5). The half positions here refer to cross-appointments.

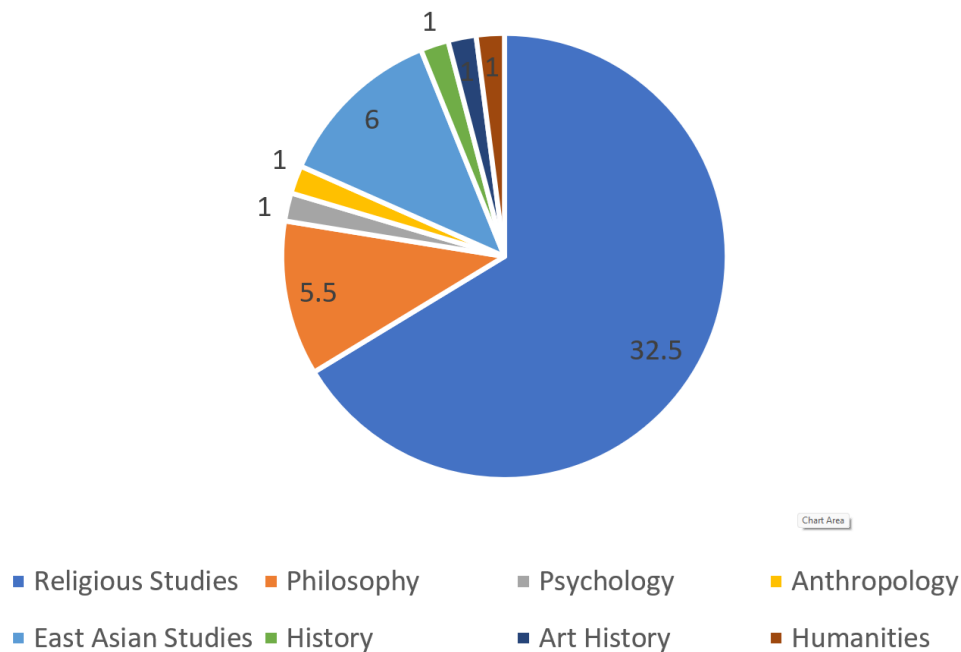


Figure 5 Faculty Positions by Program

Second, this overview highlights the practical isolation of our colleagues in the nation's universities. As Table 1 indicates, twenty-three of the programs surveyed employ only a single scholar whose research specialization relates to Buddhism; in contrast, only ten employ two or more, which is depressingly fewer than the thirteen schools that offer Buddhism-related courses but employ *no* full-time faculty with a research focus on the tradition. As one of these monads, and as a depressive with first-hand experience of the catastrophic psychological consequences of loneliness, I can't help but see these numbers as part of the experience of "*dukkha*" that my colleague bemoaned at the Buddhist studies in Canada workshop.¹⁷ Feelings of isolation, the absent potential of collegial

¹⁷ For a summary of contemporary research on loneliness, which the author surveys as part of his thesis that it is exacerbated by digital technologies that hijack our social attention, see Hayes, *The Siren's Call*, 84–87.

discussion about current research, and the constant need to justify the significance of one's research are emotionally draining and existentially demoralizing. In more practical terms, this distribution also suggests that a reasonable percentage of the 141 Buddhism-related courses being taught in this academic year must either have been assigned to contract instructors or have been taught by faculty without appropriate training in Buddhist studies. This is especially the case in philosophy departments, where we can see that—of the twenty-two programs offering courses related to Buddhism—only nine employ at least one faculty member whose research profile and teaching interests mentions the subject.¹⁸ This can also be read as further evidence of that discipline's tokenism problem: the course offerings reviewed herein show that some effort has been made to repudiate philosophy's parochialism, but that these concerns were not pressing enough to offer multiple courses related to the subject or to hire faculty members with appropriate expertise.

Another potentially notable feature of our cohort is how top-heavy it appears to be. While I recognize that the “assistant professor” rank is by its nature a more temporary one (a 4-to-5-year purgatory), the distribution still seems skewed in favour of the more advanced ranks (see Fig. 6). That said, if we presume an average career length of thirty years, perhaps these findings are typical. This is a case where comparison within and between faculties would provide useful data, albeit being outside the scope of the present analysis. In any case, the sheer number of full professors (as compared to assistants) suggests a potential demographic bubble:

¹⁸ Specifically: Lakehead, 1; SFU, 1; Memorial, 0.5 (cross-appointed with Religion); TMU, 1; Wilfred Laurier, 1; Brock, 2; U. of T., 1; OttawaU, 1.

an aging population that might lack the replacement rate required for our discipline's continued survival.

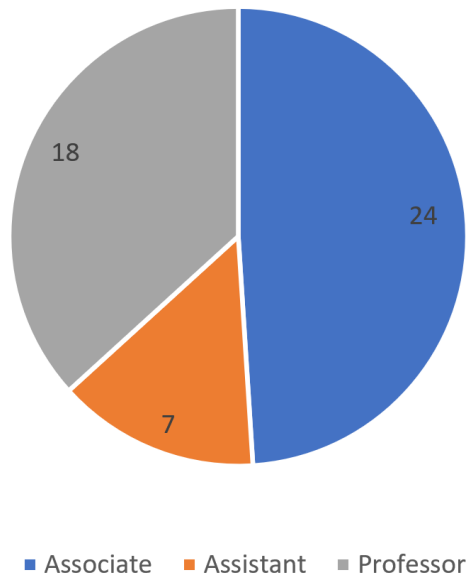


Figure 6 Faculty Positions by Rank

This review has left me with a series of takeaways, all of which were foreshadowed above and many of which speak to the feelings of dissatisfaction many of us experience daily in our professional lives. First, the presence of the sheer number of Buddhism-related courses in our nation's university calendars speaks to a continued student interest in the topic: an interest that is incommensurate with the dearth of full-time positions for faculty members with the relevant expertise to instruct such courses. It is a moral travesty that so many of our colleagues are forced into precarious contract labour when there is clearly an appetite for these courses in the national student body. Likewise, when approximately half of the tenure-track academics studying Buddhism in this country (23/49=47%) are monads—scholars working alone in their respective programs—we need to think more seriously about the importance of solidarity and

collaboration. Given that we cannot count on an increase in faculty positions at any given institution, it is vital for us to create opportunities to meet and work together whenever possible. Events like 2024 Buddhist studies in Canada workshop should be regular occurrences, if only for reinforcing a sense of collegial identity and for setting up temporary redoubts against the existential crush of loneliness. Such events should also actively include graduate students and contingent faculty, given that the precarity of such positions is itself a major source of hardship (financial, emotional, and otherwise). Isolation and loneliness make such travails even harder to endure.

Second, and while many of us rail against the “Protestant Presuppositions” inherent in religious studies as a discipline (ubiquitous assumptions in our disciplinary vocabulary, theoretical toolkits, and the like), it is clear that such programs are still the most common home for Buddhist studies scholars in Canada. Moreover, such programs house basically the only opportunities for undergraduates to take more than one course on Buddhism, with a minor exception being the large area studies programs at research-heavy universities like UBC and U of T. The nation’s philosophy and psychology departments, in contrast, often include only single courses whose descriptions reference Buddhism and rarely employ professors (or at least *tenured* professors) whose research interests include any mention of Buddhist traditions. In such cases, these programs are indeed responding to justified critiques of their disciplines’ eurocentrism (and, likely, attempting to appeal to students’ stated desires for more diversity in course offerings), but doing so in a feeble, tokenistic manner. Restating van Norden’s critique, it seems reasonable to suggest that any humanities or philosophy education claiming to offer universal/universalizable insights into the “human experience” or “human thought” should expand its scope of course offerings (and faculty hires) beyond classical “Western” thinkers, storytellers, and poets. This is especially salient in 2026, when 30% of Canadian university students identify as

members of visible minorities: they too deserve to see themselves (and their diverse array of cultural traditions) reflected in our course offerings.¹⁹ We must do better.

Part Two: Trying to Do Better

As professors in a field where the classroom to employment pipeline is circuitous at best (and where many of our colleagues actively discourage students from pursuing careers in academia on moral grounds), we paradoxically find ourselves in a uniquely privileged position with regard to our undergrad students: since we tend to teach elective courses, we have much more freedom to meet students where they are allowing us to concentrate on our work as teachers. In particular, we are not beholden to external certification boards, we rarely need to worry about our courses serving as prerequisites (or, at very least, we know that we will likely be teaching any subsequent courses as well), and we know that the vast majority of our students have enrolled because they are interested in the subject matter. This frees us, at least within more supportive institutional contexts, to experiment with alternative grading, experiential learning, activist scholarship, and more student-centric philosophies of education (all topics covered in the contributions to this volume).

This state of affairs reminds me of an anecdote related to me by one of my academic heroes, who found himself teaching the Intro Buddhism class in the first in-person semester after the COVID lockdowns concluded. In his first in-class session, he launched into his standard

¹⁹ Katelynn Carter-Rogers et al., "The Future of Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in Post-Secondary Education," in *Leading the Way: Envisioning the Future of Higher Education*, ed. Meghan E. Norris and Steven M. Smith (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2024), 11–26, <https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/futureofhighereducation/chapter/diapostsecondary/>.

“Buddhism 1000” spiel—a lecture he’d given innumerable times—when he noticed a certain haunted restlessness in the classroom. He could have pushed through this realization and continued his lesson, but he didn’t. Instead, he stopped and asked the students how they were doing, discovering in the process that they were scared, confused, and overwhelmed at being back. Again, I can imagine the temptation to offer treacly commiseration and then try “get the class back on track.” Rather than shoehorning these student concerns into his plan for the course, however, he continued this conversation with the class and, by the end of the first session, had collaboratively redesigned the syllabus to center on the problem of suffering (*dukkha*), as articulated in various Buddhist contexts. As is probably unsurprising, this newly redesigned class ended up being a tremendous success.²⁰

While we do not all have the freedom to jettison a syllabus on the fly (the scholar described previously is a tenured professor), it nonetheless offers a valuable template. Whether through our assignment design, assessment strategies, selection of readings/audiovisual materials, and choices of pedagogical techniques, we can all do more to make our courses meaningful and relevant to our students. In the section that follows, I will outline some of the ways that I have tried to do so in my own classroom, with the remainder of this issue offering further perspectives from the “disciplinary trenches,” in addition to three research articles on related topics.

I will begin by admitting that I have now embraced my long-held conviction that there is no apolitical way to teach about Buddhism. In so

²⁰ Both the dialogical approach and the decision to treat students as co-learners here are examples of the sort of pedagogy advocated by Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. by Myra Bergman Ramos (Herder and Herder, 1970; repr., Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 72–75. Freire aspirationally describes this as a “quest for mutual humanization” 1970 (275).

doing, I am, of course, not advocating that our material should be presented in a politically partisan fashion, but rather that *any* approach to Buddhism is ideological and is thus bound up in power relations.²¹ In light of the horrors currently facing the world, and the future place of my students within it, I feel that trying to teach Buddhism “neutrally,” as I did ten years ago, is an exercise in reactionary centrism: in our context, a failure to comment on and react to the global situation is tantamount to an endorsement, especially when one presents to their students as a straight, white man (as I do).²² In response, I now use the first session of my *Intro Buddhism* class as an opportunity for “culture jamming” (in the Naomi Klein/*Adbusters* sense of the term), in which I go after both the commodification of Buddhism in the modern West and the racist (!) assumptions underlying the commonplace assertion that Buddhism is “more of a spirituality than a religion.”²³

In the first case, I present evidence from an amateur ethnographic trip to my local Whole Foods, wherein I surveyed the entire store and catalogued every item that textually or pictorially referenced any religious/spiritual figure, text, or movement. While I generally found more items than I would have expected, including *Ezekiel 4.9* bread (following a

²¹ While this claim sounds somewhat Foucauldian, I’m more inspired by Odell here, who notes that “[p]olitics necessarily exist between even two individuals with free will” (*How To Do Nothing*, 52). On this more expansive understanding of politics, and how it could rectify some of the excesses of western individualism, see Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, *Confucian Feminism: A Practical Ethic for Life* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024).

²² As part of their discussion of the ongoing culture war among American convert Buddhists, Gleig and Brenna Artinger define a “reactionary centrist” as: “someone who says they’re politically neutral, but who usually punches left while sympathizing with the right.” Anne Gleig and Brenna Artinger, “The #BuddhistCultureWars: BuddhaBros, Alt-Right Dharma, and Snowflake Sanghas,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 22, no. 1 (2021): 26.

²³ A similar impulse seems to have inspired Bernard Faure to produce *Unmasking Buddhism*, a book whose various chapters aim to correct common misconceptions about Buddhism. Bernard Faure, *Unmasking Buddhism* (Wiley Blackwell, 2009).

biblical recipe) and the problematically named *Global Shaman* smudging sage, such examples were dwarfed by the volume of snacks and beverages whose packaging uses Buddhist language/images.²⁴ More surprising to me, however, was the fact that my local Whole Foods also carries *Tricycle*, *Lion's Roar* and several other Buddhist publications in their “impulse buy” rack near the tills: a space otherwise devoted to celebrity gossip, recipe collections, and magazines devoted to fitness, beauty and dieting. These data points provide an opportunity to discuss the ways that Buddhism, when decontextualized and treated as an entrée option at the spiritual buffet, is commodifiable in ways that ideas and figures seen as explicitly “religious” are not.²⁵ One can see the destabilizing effect of this discussion on students’ faces, especially when they consider that their mental picture of Buddhism is one that *just so happens* to be compatible with the large scale corporate interests that drive late-stage capitalism: a major irony when considered in light of the tradition’s focus on mendicancy (especially in the South and Southeast Asian contexts).²⁶ The next time I offer this class, I plan to conclude this section by having students read and

²⁴ Ezekiel Bread: <https://www.wholefoodsmarket.com/product/food-for-life-organic-ezekiel-49-bread-24-oz-b000rey4mo>. Blue sage: <https://www.wholefoodsmarket.com/product/smudge-blue%20sage.%201%20ea-b01j9d7vws>. “Oh My Ghee” Buddha Bowl popcorn: <https://www.wholefoodsmarket.com/product/lesserevil-organic-oh-my-ghee-buddha-bowl-popcorn-142-gr-b07wkpxy27>. Thirsty Buddha coconut water: <https://www.wholefoodsmarket.com/products/brands/thirsty-buddha>.

Oddly, I can’t seem to find the Buddhist publications I saw in person in the WholeFoods online store, suggesting that perhaps store managers have some freedom in choosing what to stock in these racks.

²⁵ For a nice overview of the Western cultural logics of spiritual commodification, see Sophia Rose Arjana, *Buying Buddha, Selling Rumi: Orientalism and the Mystical Marketplace*, (OneWorld Academic, 2020).

²⁶ Mark Fisher uses the term “capitalist realism” to describe the ideological assumption that the western economic order is somehow necessary or unavoidable: a commonplace among the majority of my students. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2009).

discuss some selections from Andy Rotman's *Hungry Ghosts*, which translates and comments on relevant accounts from the *Avadānaśataka*, all of which aim to demonstrate the danger of cupidity and the pedagogical morality of charitable giving.²⁷ Though these tales were composed several thousand years ago, their pathologization of avarice, and their willingness to ascribe dire posthumous consequences to misers, makes them feel shockingly pertinent in our age of upward mobility for billionaires (and basically no one else).

In the second case, I would argue that—as scholars of “religion” (defined broadly) working in Canada—it behooves us to take up and enact the Calls to Action outlined by the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. While all Canadians are morally obligated to reckon with the legacy of our country's genocidal relations with its original inhabitants, I would suggest that there are additional lessons that we (as teachers) should learn from this shameful (and on-going) history of racism and intolerance. Specifically, and in keeping with the call to build “student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect,”²⁸ we should be aware of the times and places where the approaches we take to our subject matter could potentially be reinforcing student biases or even committing a form of epistemic violence against the (typically non-white) individuals who are globally engaged in the practice of Buddhism.²⁹ Just as Protestant assumptions (e.g., religion as a private, internal matter, with belief

²⁷ Rotman's introduction provides an excellent example of this sort of political engagement, considering the ways that contemporary American society has embraced as a virtue a similar sort of “meanness” to the one that these tales seem to have been written to critique millennia ago. Andy Rotman, *Hungry Ghosts* (Wisdom, 2021).

²⁸ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Calls to Action* (2015), 7, § 63, iii, https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/british-columbians-our-governments/indigenous-people/aboriginal-peoples-documents/calls_to_action_english2.pdf.

²⁹ For a helpful overview of some key theories of epistemic violence, see Claudia Brunner, “Conceptualizing epistemic violence: an interdisciplinary assemblage for IR,” *International Politics Review* 9 (2021): 193–212.

trumping practice) figure into Canadian definitions of “religion” (and thus systematically disadvantage Indigenous peoples seeking to, for example, defend their Charter right to freedom of religion),³⁰ we need to be vigilant about providing students with the intellectual and cultural resources to engage critically with Western assumptions about Buddhism.

As a simple example, another feature of my first *Intro to Buddhism* sessions involves taking an informal poll, asking my students whether they think Buddhism is better characterized as a “religion” or a “spirituality.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, many opt for the latter option. When we then unpack why they made this selection, and what it *means* to them, we often uncover the same sort of “Protestant Presuppositions”³¹ critiqued by Gregory Schopen decades ago: namely, they think that Buddhism is better classified as a “spirituality” because it is personal, individualistic, non-devotional, intellectual (as opposed to affective), and psychological (in that it is focused on self-help/meaning-creation instead of “empty” ritual). Importantly, they are not wrong for coming to this conclusion, given that it is ubiquitous enough to qualify as a cultural commonplace (at least in North America). The seeming compatibility of Buddhism with western spirituality is no doubt one of the reasons that the South Asian religion became so popular with the countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s. When the baby boomers put aside childish things (like having a social conscience), their fascination with Buddhism remained, recast into a form compatible with their rapacious embrace of neo-liberal capitalism, in which this “exotic,” “foreign” religion became both a commodity and a panacea: a solipsistic system of self-soothing. Even the anti-

³⁰ See, for example, Jennifer Reid, “Indian Residential Schools: A Governmental Assault on Religious Freedom,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 44, no. 4 (2015): 441–456.

³¹ For the classic statement of this case, see Gregory Schopen, “Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism,” *History of Religions* 31, no. 1 (Aug. 1991): 1–23.

religious New Atheists of the first decade of the twenty-first century accepted this popular narrative, often choosing to position Buddhism as the “model minority” of non-western religions, a funhouse mirror in which they could reflect their hysterical, post-9/11 caricatures of Islam.³²

I try to highlight this point about epistemic justice in an overt fashion by the end of the first class period. Once students have reflected on what they mean by “spirituality” vs. “religion,” I ask them how confident they feel in their assessments (usually, the answer is “very”). I then show a series of pictures: on the left of frame, images of white practitioners meditating, and, on the right, a succession of Sri Lankan funerals, Japanese temple chanting, Tibetan mandala making, and the like. After several such figural comparisons, I end the class with a rhetorical question: why do you feel so confident saying that the people on the left are doing Buddhism *correctly* and those on the right are doing it *incorrectly* (based on the definitions of “religion” and “spirituality” that they themselves proposed)? There is usually a moment of pin-drop silence when students realize the implicit racism underlying their idealized picture of “real” Buddhism.

At the end of my most recent experience teaching this course, a student whose family had immigrated to Canada from Cambodia came by to thank me for having taken this approach, noting that it was the first time she had ever felt like her personal experience of Buddhism had been taken seriously. Also, though she hadn't been familiar with the notion of

³² For instance, Richard Dawkins makes the following claim in *The God Delusion*: “I shall not be concerned at all with other religions such as Buddhism or Confucianism. Indeed, there is something to be said for treating these not as religions at all but as ethical systems or philosophies of life.” Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 37–38. Making such a determination, as both Dawkins and my students often do, obviously requires making value judgments about aspects of the traditions, often relying on what David McMahan describes as the core-accretions paradigm. David McMahan, “De-mythologization and the Core-versus-Accretions Model of Buddhism,” *Indian International Journal of Buddhism* 10, no. 5 (2004), 63–99.

epistemic violence before taking the course, learning about that concept had given her language to describe the queasy discomfiture that she mentioned feeling when the (predominantly white) people around her opined confidently about some hypothetical form of “real” Buddhism that bore only a passing resemblance to the tradition in which she was raised. By helping students recognize their ideological situatedness, we allow them to engage more meaningfully in our increasingly global, multicultural world: a necessary cornerstone towards building the “intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect” advocated by the TRC.

There are obviously innumerable other ways that we—as scholars teaching Buddhism—can do better by our students. The other contributions to this issue provide a sampling, running the gamut from subject matter choices and course design to assessment strategies and classroom management.

Overview of the Issue and Conclusion

To begin, the three research articles, contributed by Jennifer Bright, Adeana McNicholl, and Frances Garrett, all offer robust consideration of the practical and moral considerations associated with teaching Buddhism in 2026.

First, Bright offers a sustained and thorough exploration of a moral issue I alluded to above: namely, our responsibility—as public intellectuals in Canadian institutions—to take the Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission seriously. From the perspective of her unique institutional context, a multifaith theological program at Emmanuel College (University of Toronto), she explores the ways that decolonial pedagogy makes her Masters of Psychospiritual Studies (MPS) students better able to respond to the needs of multicultural constituents and patients in

Canadian communities and organizations. She argues for the necessity of creating both safe and brave learning spaces, in which students feel supported to do the emotionally and intellectually challenging work of confronting their own prejudices, recognizing and celebrating differences, and co-creating inclusive learning communities, offering both theoretical rationales and practical advice from her own pedagogical experience.

McNicholl's piece engages with similar themes and approaches (namely, decolonial and anti-racist pedagogy) to explore how foregrounding Black history can help to challenge problematic student misconceptions about Buddhism. Moreover, she persuasively argues that reconsidering our sources and rethinking our syllabi to intentionally recognize that "Black Lives Matter" in Buddhist studies has the additional benefit of challenging and deconstructing the Orientalist, racist, and colonial assumptions that underlie much scholarship in our field. In addition to the useful practical reflections on her own teaching, this piece is also invaluable for its robust scholarly apparatus and capacious bibliography, bringing together decades of scholarship on both Black Buddhism (in particular), and the feminist and postcolonial scholarship that has inspired her (and many other likeminded scholars) to rethink our approaches to the discipline.

The third research article by Garrett offers an in-depth overview and impassioned defense of the University of Toronto's Buddhist Studies program and, specifically, the Buddhism, Psychology, and Mental Health (BPMH) minor. Reviewing decades of data on this program, including enrollments statistics and student testimonials, she explores the ways that this unique interdisciplinary program allows instructors to take student mental health seriously and empower students to create community, take control over their own learning, and make meaningful impacts in their university life and beyond. As a result of her role in this program, Garrett was inspired to reconsider her own approach to teaching. By bringing

together insights from contemplative studies and the sorts of anti-racist, decolonial pedagogies already discussed, she argues that programs like BPMH provide unique theoretical and practical resources to address the innumerable challenges faced by students today.

In addition to these three research articles, the issue also features six shorter pieces reflecting on specific pedagogical approaches and techniques that their authors have employed to respond to the challenges of teaching Buddhism in our current historical moment.

- Yongshan He describes her employment of “micro-experiential activities” (i.e., activities that can be performed in 20 minutes or less) as a means of fostering student engagement;
- Pascale F. Engelmaier and Massimo A. Rondolino detail their approach to team-teaching an honours course on mindfulness, in which they aim to introduce students to the Buddhist origins of the concept, its western appropriation(s), and its potential value as an embodied practice;
- James Benn’s piece offers insights from his decades of experience instructing graduate seminars on Buddhism, exploring the integration of traditional Buddhist studies approaches (a focus on textual study, recognition of intellectual lineages, etc.) with a recognition of changing trends in both the discipline itself and in student interests;
- Anna Lännström reflects on the challenges inherent in teaching students who are struggling intellectually, existentially, and emotionally, detailing how she has endeavoured to “meet students where they are” as a means of addressing these sets of interrelated issues;
- Ben Van Overmeire outlines his rationale for adopting an “ungraded” approach to student evaluation within his classroom, explaining how it fosters more genuine intellectual engagement, as

well as detailing specific assignments and techniques that he has employed in this transition;

- Finally, C. Pierce Salguero's piece serves as a bookend to this issue, as it picks up on the broad existential concerns facing both students and professors that I introduced at the beginning of this essay. In response, he proposes a "pedagogy of the soul" as a corrective: an embodied, affective, aesthetic approach to learning that recognizes the transformative power of the classroom, reimagining "teaching as a vital healing practice for a broken world."

While each of these pieces is necessarily coloured by the personal, disciplinary, and institutional situatedness of their respective authors, they are united by a common focus: namely, reflecting on the initial practical steps that we (as a collective of educators) have been taking to make our teaching more robust, more inclusive and more relevant, and publicly stating our commitment to continue on this quest, regardless of how quixotic the horrors of the world sometimes make it feel.

Returning to the survey of Buddhism courses at Canadian universities, there is perhaps some reason for hope. Though many of us are alone teaching these courses in our respective departments, the sheer number of courses on the books at our various institutions speaks to an abiding student interest in the subject. And, unlike the more "practical" skills being taught in accounting and computer science programs, the deep thinking, critical reading and writing, and introspection that one can learn in our classes remain a defensible redoubt against the crush of digital automation. Even if the end is coming, whether due to climate collapse or the existential peril of superhuman AI,³³ there are few things I see more value in doing than helping my students think more clearly and capaciously,

³³ On the existential threat posed by AI, see the grim conclusions offered by two long-time AI alignment researchers: Eliezer Yudkowsky and Nate Soares, *If Anyone Builds It, Everyone Dies: The Case Against Superintelligent AI* (Little, Brown and Company, 2025).

and encouraging them (and myself) to extend our empathy to all our co-learners (i.e., everybody). If a student leaves one of my courses with a new idea, perspective, or habit (even if it is hidden away, like a precious gem sewn into the lining of a coat), and whatever they learned helps them to better cope with one of life's challenges, I think I will have done some good. Each of the contributions to this special issue represent perspectives from my far-flung colleagues on their ways of doing just that. In the end, what else can we hope for?

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AI Use Declaration

No artificial intelligence tools, such as LLMs, were employed in the composition of this article. The author decries the use of such technology as an affront to our shared humanity and, in particular, our ability to engage in meaningful dialogue.

Notes on the Contributor

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Word Count

8285