

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<https://thecjbs.org/>

Number 20, 2025/2026

Meeting students where they are:
How I teach Buddhist philosophy to
post-pandemic Gen Z sophomores

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Meeting students where they are: How I teach Buddhist philosophy to post-pandemic Gen Z sophomores

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Abstract

This article outlines the ways my post-pandemic students struggle more than previous cohorts and describes how I have adapted my introductory Buddhism class to meet them where they are. Rather than teaching difficult classical texts, I integrate accessible readings with mindfulness meditation practices and personal reflection. I encourage students to consider Buddhism as an alternative to their unexamined materialism and individualism, we experiment with mindfulness practices to see if they help students struggle less, and we explore the issues of cultural appropriation and McM mindfulness which arise as a result.

Introduction

One of my own college professors used the same lecture notes for thirty years. They were handwritten, and by the time I was in his class, the paper was yellowed and fragile.

I'm glad that he had long since retired when the pandemic hit. I don't think he could have adapted to teaching during the upheaval that we have been through in the past few years. And I don't think he would have been able to adjust to teaching in our post-pandemic world.

Having passed through the pandemic, the world seems... different. Our students seem... different. And, it seems, we need to teach... differently.

So what does this mean for how we teach Buddhism? I wrestled with this question over the past year as I developed a new philosophy elective on Buddhism. When I started brainstorming course content, I was excited, but I soon became frustrated. None of my ideas seemed to fit the students I am working with these days. I went online and looked at other people's syllabi, but they didn't seem right either. Most were multidisciplinary survey courses. There were many philosophy courses as well, but they seemed to be designed for students who were already decent readers and who had taken more than a course or two in philosophy. They wouldn't work for my students.

Making things worse for myself, I also hyperinflated the stakes. Chances are that my students will only take a single course on Buddhism. And that means that my course would need to do justice to 2500 years of history across many countries, traditions that are developing and transforming, cross-pollinating with other traditions. So many thinkers. So many ideas. So many cultures. Such riches. How does one do justice to all that?

It's impossible of course. And recognizing that I couldn't avoid leaving important things out was liberating. I took a deep breath and started over: *Who are my students, and how do I meet them where they are?*

A portrait of my post-pandemic students

I teach at Stonehill College, a Catholic college in the Holy Cross tradition, and we have 2200 students. They are predominantly white and upper middle class. Almost all are culturally Christian (mostly Catholic), but few are religious. They are practical rather than philosophical, and many of them major in business or in other preprofessional fields.

My Buddhism course needed to be a sophomore level elective with no prerequisites. When I taught it for the first time last semester, all the students had taken an introductory course in philosophy, but few had taken more than two. Only two were philosophy majors and none were in religious (or Asian) studies. Only three had taken another class on Buddhism. For most of them, this will be their only course on Buddhism in college.

Like students across the globe, Stonehill's student population has changed in many ways in the past ten years, and especially during the pandemic and its aftermath. The students in my Buddhism class last semester were no exception. The following changes seem crucial:

They struggle intellectually. In my classes, I especially notice that my students now are less experienced readers. Every year, the incoming students find it harder to get the basic sense of a reading,

and many see even relatively simple classic texts as impenetrable.¹ And they are not convinced that reading old texts is a valuable skill in the first place, which means that they are not motivated to improve.

They struggle existentially. They lack a worldview that can provide an alternative and counterbalance to the superficial materialism and individualism that surrounds them. Fewer and fewer are either religious or spiritual. They and sometimes their parents have rejected the Christianity they grew up with, and they haven't put anything in its place.² I suspect that this is part of what makes them seem so *lost*.

They struggle emotionally. They are unfocused, stressed out, and exhausted, and they are dealing with a dizzying array of mental health issues, especially depression, anxiety, and eating disorders. Students also report more loneliness, even past the pandemic. They seem plagued by fears of not making it, worried about financial security, and anxious about their own safety and about the state of the world.³

¹ See Beth Muthrie, "Is this the end of reading?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 9, 2024, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/is-this-the-end-of-reading>, and Adam Kotsko, "The loss of things I took for granted," *Slate*, February 2024, for helpful discussions.

² See chapter 5 of Jean Twenge, *iGen: Why today's super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious, more tolerant, less happy—and completely unprepared for adulthood (and what this means for the rest of us)* (Atria Books, 2017).

³ We've been swimming in reports and articles about student mental health data for a while now. For some of the sources, see the Center for Disease Control's website, and the Healthy Minds survey.

But it's not all bad news:

They are well meaning, kind, and (at least in principle) committed to social justice.

Students in philosophy electives tend to be fascinated by existential questions, social justice issues, and speculative questions about the afterlife. And they're curious about Buddhism and other Asian religions.

Like most people, they're more interested in readings that address questions they themselves have and in discussions that provoke insights that could make a difference in their own lives.

They respond well to contemporary materials, things that seem relevant, and to being exposed to a variety of voices and perspectives, especially to voices that traditionally have been excluded.

They also respond well to variety in content and writing style. They prefer narrative to analysis, stories to arguments.

They're bored with lecture classes and even the quieter students are generally grateful for a class where the professor doesn't just do "stand and deliver," but which is rich in discussion and opportunities to hear what other students think.

Meeting my students where they are

After reflecting on the students that were likely to be in my class, I set out to create and teach a course that would prioritize meeting them where they are, **intellectually, existentially and emotionally**.

In this course, **I met my students where they were intellectually** by adapting the materials to their reading level. This can be done in many

different ways. Our goals determine which way is better. If our main goal is ensuring that students memorize and understand the differences between different types of Buddhism, we might assign a good textbook with plenty of supporting videos and audio clips, and then teach a lecture-based class. If our main goal is to teach them to read ancient texts, we start by motivating them to put in the work, showing them that old books still matter. Then, we add scaffolding to the assigned texts, and spend a lot of class time on exegesis, slowly and carefully working through the readings together.

I would love for my students to become deeply knowledgeable about the wide variety of Buddhisms and also skilled at reading ancient texts. But these weren't my main goals for this course, so I didn't focus on either. I wanted us to spend most of our time discussing ideas and examining and practicing ways of life. If I also had tried to teach them to read difficult texts, I would have needed to set aside substantial blocks of time for practicing reading. I wasn't willing to make that tradeoff. Instead, I looked for readings that were simple enough that my students would be able to read them on their own and come in prepared to discuss. I wanted to use a single book as our main text, but I had a terrible time finding one that would work. Most were either multidisciplinary surveys or more advanced philosophy texts, and neither was right for my class. I thought I might use Mark Siderits' *The Buddha's Teachings as philosophy* (2022),⁴ but when I reread it, I realized that it was too advanced for my class of non-majors. I very much liked Cathy Cantwell's *Buddhism: The basics* (2010),⁵ but my students would have struggled with her language and, besides, I needed something that was more focused on philosophy.

⁴ Mark Siderits, *The Buddha's Teachings as Philosophy* (Hackett Publishing, 2022).

⁵ Cathy Cantwell, *Buddhism: the basics* (Routledge, 2010).

I had almost given up when I stumbled on Nicolas Bommarito's *Seeing clearly: A buddhist guide to life* (2020).⁶ It's a great little book that makes philosophical but nontechnical arguments about reality, ethics, and the connections between them. It is accessible but also scholarly responsible, and it highlights the variety of Buddhist teachings and practices without getting bogged down in details. My students responded well to it, finding his writing and his tone both engaging and straightforward. Their main complaint was that they thought Bommarito sometimes spent too much time defending Buddhism against unpersuasive objections. For example, my culturally Catholic students were used to the idea of worshipping relics and didn't understand why Bommarito felt the need to spend so much energy on making it seem less weird. (In contrast, my one Jewish student found his discussion of relic worship very helpful.)

My favorite part of *Seeing clearly* is that half the book is devoted to practices—and not just meditation. That was helpful in my class because it signaled to the students that these practices are important parts of Buddhism. Too often, Western philosophers reduce Buddhism to its teachings; too often, people in the West reduce Buddhist practice to mindfulness meditation. And Bommarito also highlights the importance of the practices by showing the ways in which they help people attain the goals articulated in the teachings. For example, the practice of giving is a key way of reducing attachment (and then reducing attachment helps people give more generously).

Bommarito feels like a kindred spirit to me because I aim to integrate practice in all my classes, especially when I teach philosophies that focus on how to live. I do that because I believe that the study of philosophy should be practical. Our encounter with other people's ideas should prompt us to reflect on ourselves, reexamine our beliefs and, sometimes, make changes. But I made this practical focus more central still in my

⁶ Nicolas Bommarito, *Seeing clearly: a buddhist guide to life* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

Buddhism course because my bet is that the mindfulness movement is right: Buddhist-style thinking and practice really can help. And in my view, we need all the help we can get.

And so, I incorporated Buddhist practices in the course in order to **meet the students where they are existentially and emotionally**. The class explored Buddhism as a thoughtful and livable alternative to their own superficial and unexamined materialism, an alternative different from the Christianity that most of them had dismissed. I encouraged them to reflect upon their values (lived and professed) and to think about the ways in which Buddhism supports and challenges those values. I made space for them to reflect on their own mental health struggles, and we thought about ways that Buddhist practices and teachings may or may not help. We talked about how their own attitudes and beliefs sometimes cause suffering by shaping and distorting their lived realities and how they repeatedly injure themselves with that second arrow from the famous parable. Together, we explored the possibility that Buddhist ideas and practices could help them live better lives—less lost, anxious, and depressed, and more intentional.

Setting up my class: Part 1 of the course

In the first class session, I elicited my students' ideas about Buddhism. Unsurprisingly, they associated it strongly with mindfulness and meditation. Several had tried mindfulness practice in a class or on a sports team. They were inclined to think that there was something deep and good in there. Like most of my students, they approved of Buddhism because they saw it as nonjudgmental, modern, and scientific. Many of them viewed it as much superior to Catholicism and other forms of Christianity. We used their version of Buddhism as a starting point for the class.

In the first class, I also introduced the practice of mindfulness and basic breathing meditation. That allowed us to incorporate the practices right away. For the first several weeks, we began each class with a simple breathing meditation. We then reflected upon the experience, discussed the challenges it involved and shared insights, and we also read about mindfulness and meditation, starting with Thich Nhat Hanh's *The Miracle of Mindfulness* which became a class favorite and which inspired one student to join a Buddhist meditation center. Later in the semester, we switched to *metta* meditation (another class favorite!) and we learned about additional practices.

I have experimented with integrating meditation and other mindfulness practices in my classes for several years now, and my impression is that learning mindfulness helps at least some students cope better.⁷ Caution is warranted here: Assessment of mindfulness-based techniques in the world beyond my classroom is in the early stages yet, and it is overly reliant on self-reports and reports by enthusiastic teachers. And some students don't seem to benefit at all. But many of my students do report getting better at noticing how they are doing and at self-regulation (for example, using their breathing to calm down or using meditation to go to sleep). They say they come out of the meditation sessions feeling calmer than when they arrived and that this calm lasts throughout much of the day. They notice ways in which their own thinking makes their suffering worse and ways in which they can try adjusting their thinking, and sometimes they even manage to make such adjustments. They realize that it isn't a one-time fix but a lifelong practice involving much backsliding. For many of my students, this type of self-awareness and self-work is entirely new. It won't fix all their problems, to be sure. But it provides a good start for some of them. And it also makes the course work better. A few minutes

⁷ This paragraph is a revision of a section of my paper "Let's be Buddhists for the next few weeks! Costs and benefits of making students explore Buddhism from the inside" *The Wabash Center Journal on Teaching* 2, no. 1 (2021): 57.

of quiet focus in the beginning of each session helps all of us to settle in, relax, and turn our attention to the topic of the day.

In addition to experimenting with some Buddhist practices, I also asked my students to use Buddhist teachings to examine their own beliefs. I wanted to offer them different ways of thinking about ethics and meaning, and I wanted them to use Buddhist teachings to challenge their unexamined materialism and individualism. I think they benefitted from being exposed to views that urged them to reduce their attachment to their selves, bodies, money, and possessions and views that encourage them to see themselves as interconnected and as parts of something larger than themselves. I wanted them to notice the ways in which they are unthinkingly committed to materialism and individualism, and to ask themselves whether that is how they want to live. I also wanted them to reflect on the possibility that their habitual ways of thinking contribute to their own suffering and to ask if the drama in their lives and the stuff that they obsess about really matter. Too many of our students lack these alternative perspectives and I think that may be part of why their problems loom overwhelmingly large. If studying Buddhism can help them develop a wider perspective and alternatives to their habitual ways of thinking, it might help them live a bit better.

I'm constantly surprised by which ideas are new to them. Here are some examples from my students' writing:

Paying attention is really hard but it gets easier if I practice—and if I turn off my phone.

Some of our suffering is self-imposed, and that means we can reduce it.

The way I'm thinking about my problem might be making it worse.

Money might not equal happiness and I picked a major because I assumed it did.

They had heard some of these claims before to be sure. But many of them hadn't thought about them carefully and they hadn't engaged with them as living alternatives. And they certainly hadn't internalized them and made them their own. I am hoping that the class showed them viable alternatives to the messages they are continually being fed and that it made clear that they have choices to make.

Buddhism beyond mindfulness: Parts 2-4 of the course

Whenever I incorporate Buddhist practices in a course, I worry about falling into simplistic McMindfulness and cultural appropriation.⁸ To help mitigate the risk, my students and I examined our own mindfulness practices and the secular story of Buddhism in the second part of the course: What have we been leaving out? How can we minimize cultural appropriation in our practice? We read Funie Hsu's "How mainstream mindfulness erases its Buddhist roots" and "We've been here all along,"⁹ as well as selections from Donald Lopez' *The Scientific Buddha*.¹⁰ We paid attention to the many different ways in which Buddhists understand and practice Buddhism, reading stories from college-age American Buddhists in Chenxing

⁸ Ron Purser's term, not mine! See Ron Purser, *McMindfulness: How mindfulness became the new capitalist spirituality* (Repeater Books, 2019).

⁹ Funie Hsu, "How mainstream mindfulness erases its Buddhist roots," *The Progressive*, February 2022, <https://progressive.org/latest/how-mainstream-mindfulness-erases-buddhist-roots-hsu-220211/>; Funie Hsu, "We've been here all along," *Buddhadharma: The Practitioner's Quarterly*, Winter 2016, <https://www.lionsroar.com/weve-been-here-all-along/>.

¹⁰ Donald Lopez, *The Scientific Buddha: His Short and Happy Life* (Yale University Press, 2012).

Han's *Be the refuge: Raising the voices of Asian-American Buddhists*.¹¹ And we considered broader social justice issues: Who speaks for Buddhism and why?

Other contributors to this volume focus on ways to decolonize our syllabi, so I'm not saying much about it in this essay. But I do want to recommend Funie Hsu's work and the Angry Asian Buddhist blog because they have been so important to my own intellectual development. Reading them helped me see the ways that my previous attempts at teaching Buddhism were too dominated by white scholars, white convert monks, and wise Asian monks, and it motivated me to change. My reading list still isn't centering Asian-American work in the way that I would prefer, but it's improving. Crawl first, run later.

In the third part of the course, we studied the Buddha himself. We thought about ways in which he's portrayed as a man and ways in which he seems more like a god. We discussed the role of relics in Buddhism, noticing that it creates difficulties for the view that Buddhism is a philosophy and not a religion.

In the fourth and largest part of the course, we delved into Buddhist philosophy: What is real, and how does the nature of reality affect how we should live? We considered teachings about impermanence and no-self. We discussed meditation practices, asking what one might gain by meditating on corpses and how that is connected to the metaphysical teachings. We tried to make sense of nirvana and rebirth. We thought about ways that teachings about karma can justify injustice and investigated ways that engaged Buddhists have rethought karma.

¹¹ Chenxing Han, *Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian-American Buddhists* (North Atlantic Books, 2021).

Final papers and student takeaways

For their final papers and for our final class, I asked the students to reflect on what role they wanted the Buddhist ideas and practices from class to play in their own lives. Did they want to integrate any of them? How might integrating Buddhist ideas in their lives affect their suffering, and at what cost? I asked them to keep in mind cultural appropriation, the ways in which Buddhist ideas and practices might undermine or support their own religious faith, and any objections they might have to the ideas and practices themselves.

The papers were fun to read. A few were metaphysical explorations and critiques of the no-self teaching. Most stayed more personal and practical. A few of the students were committed Christians. They had explored Buddhism with deep respect and curiosity all semester, they had considered incorporating meditation in their lives and they were intrigued by the similarities they saw between Christian prayer and mindfulness meditation. But they ultimately rejected Buddhism, and their final papers explained their reasons for preferring Christianity. Some students discussed their desire to incorporate mindfulness, generosity and gratitude as a much needed counterweight to our overly individualistic and fast-paced culture. But others argued that Buddhism's challenges to our culture are misguided, that they really do want to stay as busy as possible. One recommitted to material success as her main life goal. Some were enamored by the idea that our mindset is so powerful, but others argued that many of our problems can't be solved by a change of mindset because our mindset isn't causing the problem in the first place. (Somebody might be depressed because of climate change and not because of their thought patterns.) Some even concluded that turning inward was a waste of time and that they wanted to work as activists to improve our collective lives instead. Next time, I hope to engage and challenge that binary.

Making peace with what I'm leaving out

The course I developed exceeded expectations, and I will teach it the same way again (after the usual minor tweaks). But I'm acutely aware that I left out important things. I spent about two minutes on the differences between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, and I skipped Zen altogether. My students didn't get a sense of the paths along which Buddhism spread across the globe or about what some of the great philosophers of the Buddhist traditions taught. I didn't even mention their names. And—this one does bother me!—we didn't have time for the ethics unit I had planned, so they probably don't know the five precepts. But teaching is the art of leaving things out. A course is small, and our subjects are big and complicated. We have to pick and choose, ignore and simplify, and focus on A at the expense of B (and C and D and E).

I may be ignoring and simplifying more than most. But I stand by my decisions because I want to teach a class that meets my students where they are. I want to give them tools that can help them address some of their unnecessary suffering. I want to give them a lot of space and time to discuss, reflect, and practice. And I want them to see the wide variety of Buddhist views and lives and to understand how we white Westerners have prioritized the more secular versions and devalued others.

And I want one more thing. I want my course to make it more likely that my course won't in fact be the only time that my students study Buddhism. I want the course to work as an invitation, so that when they leave, they recognize that Buddhism is philosophically rich and fascinating and that they have much more to learn. My bet is that a course like the one I taught is my best chance at making that happen.

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Notes on the Contributor

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Word Count

4120