

Article

The Role of Buddhist Studies in Fostering Metadisciplinary Conversations and Improving Pedagogical Collaborations

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Abstract: Buddhist studies has been at the center of a number of pedagogical experiments that have emerged on my campus over the last five years in response to Penn State University's general education reform introducing an integrative studies requirement. The first half of this paper introduces two of these interdisciplinary collaborations. I discuss the structure and goals of these two courses and detail how I integrated Buddhist Studies into the design of each. In the second half of the paper, I describe how the practice of what I call "metadisciplinarity" can help to avoid some of the pitfalls commonly faced in interdisciplinary collaborations. I discuss both how to engage in metadisciplinary reflection and communication and the strengths that Buddhist studies scholars can bring to this kind of pedagogical collaboration based on some core features of our field.

Keywords: metadisciplinary; metadisciplinarity; interdisciplinary; interdisciplinarity; multidisciplinary; multidisciplinarity; collaboration; Buddhist studies; integrative studies; general education; art



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From one perspective, you could say that the role that Buddhist studies plays in the curriculum at Abington College is insignificant. A liberal arts college of around 3700 students embedded within the Penn State University system, we are a minority-majority campus in the suburbs north of Philadelphia that provides a traditional small-college atmosphere for a culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse student population. No doubt, many of our students are themselves Buddhist, or come from families who are. However, with only 22 majors, and religious studies not included among them, we run no more than one or two Buddhist studies courses per semester, the majority of which are entry-level general education classes.

Counterintuitively, however, Buddhist studies has been at the center of a number of high-profile pedagogical experiments that have emerged on our campus over the last five years. The first half of this paper introduces two of these interdisciplinary collaborations. I discuss the structure and goals of these initiatives and detail how I integrated Buddhist Studies into the design of each. In the second half of the paper, I describe how the practice of what I call "metadisciplinarity" can help to avoid some of the pitfalls commonly faced in interdisciplinary collaborations. I discuss both how to engage in metadisciplinary reflection and communication and the strengths that Buddhist studies scholars can bring to this kind of pedagogical collaboration based on some core features of our field.¹

1. Collaboration #1: A Team-Taught Interdisciplinary Exploration of Visualization

Following national trends, in 2014, conversations were taking place at Penn State about general education reform to require "integrative studies" across the university

¹ This paper represents a small contribution to a growing body of literature on Buddhist studies pedagogy. A valuable resource for following developments in this area is the "Teaching Buddhist Studies" website, which includes workshops, online resources, an extensive annotated bibliography, and a podcast (<http://teachingbuddhism.net>). Landmark publications include Hori et al. (2004) and Lewis and DeAngelis (2017). Other recent highlights include the rising prevalence of panels on pedagogy at the American Academy of Religion since 2018 and the subsequent creation of the Buddhist Pedagogy Seminar.

system.² The policy that was eventually adopted in 2016 by the university faculty senate would require students to take six credits that integrate or bridge the so-called general education “knowledge domains” (i.e., arts, humanities, health/wellness, natural sciences, social/behavior sciences).³ As these conversations were unfolding at the university level, administrators and faculty members at campuses across the system were thinking about how these overarching goals would be implemented locally. Abington College traditionally has emphasized small classes, innovative pedagogy, and curricular experimentation, and we saw these developments as an opportunity.

In response to the new initiative, I proposed the creation of an interdisciplinary faculty collaborative who would convene on a regular basis in order to explore how to implement the university’s general education ideals on our campus, and who would pilot these ideas in a team-taught class on the topic of visualization. Aside from myself (a faculty member in the history and religious studies programs), I recruited faculty from our programs in art, new media, psychology, science, and information sciences and technology (i.e., software design) as well as a librarian. Planning sessions were held throughout fall 2014 and culminated in spring 2015 with the class. Faculty overloads and incidental support were provided by the dean of the college, who considered this a strategic investment in a pilot that would jump-start integrative studies on our campus.

The visualization course began with my presentation of *Secret Essential Methods for Curing Meditation Sickness* (治禪病秘要法; K. 744, T. 620), a Buddhist scripture from Khotan that was translated into Chinese by Juqu Jingsheng 沮渠京聲 in 455 CE. The section of the text that I introduced describes a number of complex, vivid visualization meditations intended for the purpose of healing the physical body, drawing upon both Buddhist doctrine and Chinese and Indian medical theory.⁴ Using this text as a launching-off point, in the opening weeks of the class, I led an exploration of the role of visualization in Buddhist soteriology and ritual practice, as well as discussion of the historical context of Khotan in the fifth century.

As the semester progressed, other faculty gave presentations on the neurology and psychology of visualization and meditation and led hands-on workshops in art, new media, and software development that made each discipline’s perspective on visualization accessible for nonspecialist students. The faculty had recruited advanced students across all of our majors to take this course, so there was a diverse set of skills and interests represented in the classroom. The course structure was designed to let students take advantage of their strengths while also venturing outside of their comfort zones. The semester’s work centered on three projects that each student had to complete (see Figure 1). Worth 20% of the final grade apiece, these were designed by faculty in the various disciplines with discipline-specific grading rubrics.

The class took place once per week during a three hour time block, spread out over two classrooms, two computer labs, and an art studio. (Students also were able to book studio and lab time to work on projects throughout the rest of the week.) In various corners of this shared space, history and religious studies students planned research papers on medieval Chinese Buddhism, psychology students designed a study on how visualization practice affected athletes’ basketball free-throw statistics, and art students integrated secularized mindfulness and visualization meditations into their artistic processes (sample artwork

² The Association of American Colleges and Universities has been a major proponent of integrative studies since the mid-2000s. See, e.g., <https://www.aacu.org/peerreview/2005/summer-fall>; <https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/integrative-learning>; <https://www.aacu.org/peerreview/2014-2015/fall-winter>, all last accessed 2 November 2020. The pedagogical experiments described here did not rely on guidance from AAC&U or any other publications on integrative studies. Instead, we developed our methodologies from the ground up through the metadisciplinary processes discussed below.

³ This policy added a small integrative element to an overwhelmingly “distributive” model of general education at Penn State (Hanstedt 2012, pp. 11–13). However, because no integrative courses existed in the university course catalog, it created an immediate opportunity and need for pedagogical innovations such as I have described in this article. Note that Hanstedt helpfully distinguishes between integrative and interdisciplinary studies (pp. 13–14), and the pedagogical experiments discussed here are interdisciplinary rather than integrative by his definition of these terms.

⁴ The section of the text assigned has been translated in (Greene 2017).

is given in Figure 2). New media students developed three-dimensional renderings of visualized objects that are mentioned in the *Secret Essential Methods for Curing Meditation Illness*, while the software design students placed those objects into a “visualization space” that could be navigated and manipulated with an Oculus Rift virtual reality headset.

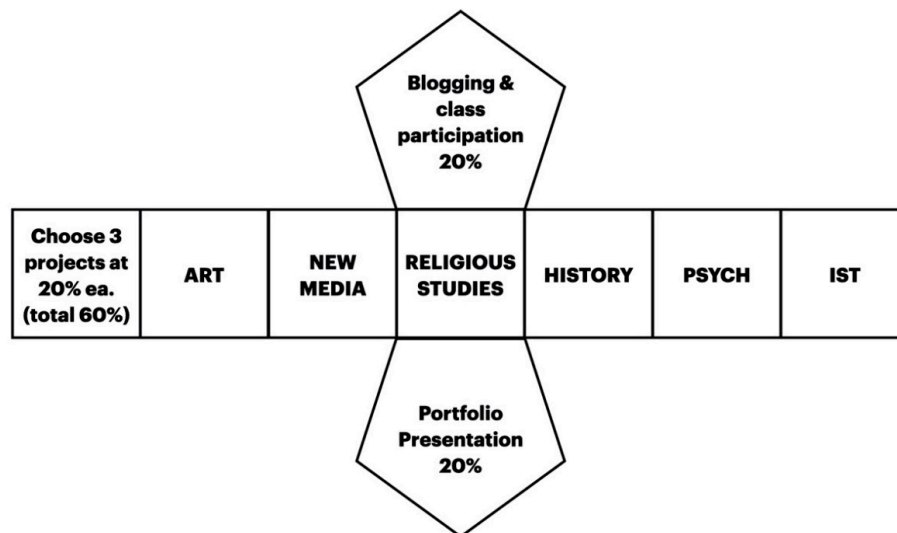


Figure 1. Image representing the components of the final grade, from the syllabus for LA 497.

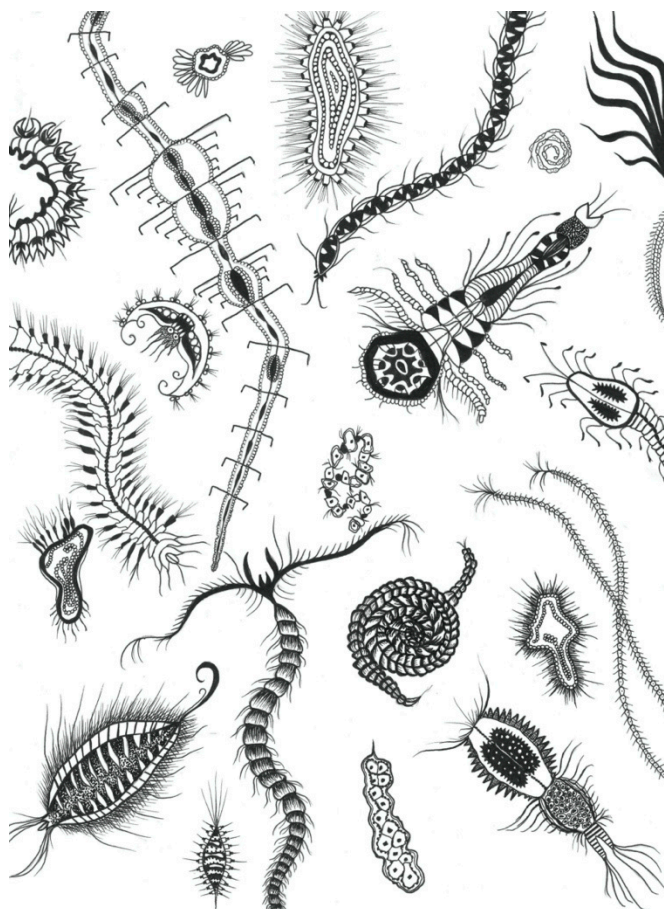


Figure 2. Susan Stanton (PSU '15, and a student in the visualization class). “Bugs,” after a passage of *Secret Essential Methods for Curing Meditation Illness*. Ink on paper, completed after the class finished in 2019.

These projects proceeded independently of one another, each supervised by the relevant faculty. However, 40% of each student's grade consisted of blogs, class discussions, and a final portfolio presentation in which they had to articulate an interdisciplinary synthesis of the three projects they were engaged in that semester (see Figure 1). Since each student's home discipline and chosen projects were unique, these components required students to independently reflect on their own choices and experiences. Depending on the type of work that students had done throughout the semester, the final submission could be a physical portfolio, e-portfolio, or some combination of the two. These were presented at the end of the semester in front of the full class with all faculty present, giving an opportunity for all participants in the collaboration to appreciate the different components and configurations, and divergent types of synthesis between and among them, that we collectively had engaged in throughout the semester.⁵

In the end, the dean was thrilled that there were many notable outcomes that emerged from this experiment. The faculty involved produced an internal white paper on how our campus could approach the new general education requirement, gave multiple conference presentations on our pedagogical experiment, and were selected as "Idea Lab" winners by the New Media Consortium in 2015. As we had hoped, several new interdisciplinary initiatives spun off from the original collaboration, including a new set of linked integrative courses around the theme of transmedia narratives and another set on gaming psychology. In the intervening years since the visualization class took place, I have continued to collaborate with one of the art faculty in that project, a sculptor and installation artist named Yvonne Love. Together, we presented a professional development session for college staff that combined mindfulness and art in 2017. We worked to bring a Tibetan sand mandala artist to campus in 2015 and 2019 and integrated his demonstration into a number of art, Asian studies, and Buddhist studies courses on campus. Love has also produced installations that were inspired by our interdisciplinary interactions, such as the porcelain sculptures shown in Figure 3.

In addition to these more quantifiable outcomes, students from a range of majors across multiple knowledge domains had the opportunity to explore Buddhist studies and to articulate their own ideas about how it integrates into their academic interests. Whether they built three-dimensional models or virtual reality environments in a computer lab, produced artwork in the studio, designed a psychological study, or wrote a research paper, everyone in the class was inspired by—or, at the very least, introduced to—some core Buddhist ideas. They did not just dabble in simplistic stereotypes about mindfulness but engaged meaningfully with a historically and culturally contextualized literary work from early medieval China. The same was also true of faculty, most of whom had no prior experience or detailed knowledge about Buddhism. Taking the field of Buddhist studies seriously was at the very heart of *everyone's* experience of interdisciplinarity during that semester.

⁵ On how portfolios and other types of "signature work" can promote integrated learning, see <https://www.aacu.org/signature-work>, last accessed November 2. (Hanstedt 2012, p. 19) draws attention to how such assignments can create "metacognitive moments" that make explicit for students how the integrative or interdisciplinary work being done applies beyond any one specific class.



Figure 3. Yvonne Love. From the series “Breath,” exhibited at Brown University’s Gallery 221. Porcelain, 2016–2019.

2. Collaboration #2: A Cluster of Linked Courses on “the Self”

This academic year (2020–2021), Love and I are collaborating again in a “cluster” of linked general education arts and humanities courses that revolve around the theme of “the self.” Designed by the current dean, the clusters are again intended to maximize opportunities for integrative studies at our college, while also hopefully positively affecting retention and student success. Love and I were chosen to be part of the first cluster experiment due to our extensive past experience as interdisciplinary collaborators. (It is also relevant that we are seasoned faculty members with tenure, while the other two members of the collaboration are relatively newly hired faculty.) The four linked courses are an introduction to Asian religions, an introduction to studio art, a survey of modern art history, and a freshman English composition class, thus spanning the knowledge domains of arts and humanities. The enrollments for these courses were capped lower than usual and limited to first-year students, so they are functionally equivalent to freshman seminars.⁶ All of the classes in the cluster are running twice, one section in the fall and one in the spring, and students are being incentivized to take more than one during the year. Given the need to limit the number of students on campus during the COVID-19 pandemic, the only section in the cluster meeting face-to-face is the art class.

Rather than combine classes for the entire semester and team-teach, as was done in the visualization class, our courses for the most part run independently of one another. However, they intersect periodically, coming together with other sections in the cluster for shared interdisciplinary projects or events. The dean left it to the faculty collaborators to decide on the types of linkages that we would develop between our classes, and we were given a small stipend to hold meetings to plan over the spring and summer of 2020. In the

⁶ On the importance of integrative pedagogy in the first-year experience, see (Tooker et al. 2015).

end, we decided to have two mandatory sessions for all students—at the beginning and end of the semester—in which the faculty modeled interdisciplinary dialogue by analyzing a single text or piece of art from our multiple perspectives and talking about where our approaches converge and diverge. In addition, we decided that all of the students in the cluster were to produce a series of self-portraits (in the broadest sense of the term). The requirements for the self-portraits are specific to the disciplinary context of each section, so, for example, those from the English composition class involve autobiographical writing, and those from the art and art history classes involve engaging with visual representations. I decided that the self-portraits from my class would combine creative writing and art, while prioritizing engagement with ideas and motifs from Asian religions.

Not all of my assignments or intersections with the other classes are relevant to this present article since they do not all involve Buddhism. I will mention here the two that do. The first is an intersection with the English composition class. Students in both classes will have the opportunity to read and analyze the biography of the Buddha, as told in the *Buddhacarita* composed by Āśvaghoṣa in early second-century CE India.⁷ My self-portrait assignment for this unit asks the students to either rewrite an episode from *Buddhacarita* as part of their own life story, or to rewrite an episode of their own lives as if it were part of the *Buddhacarita* myth. In order to successfully complete this assignment, students must be familiar with the mythic language as well as the basic plot lines of the Buddha's life story: his loss of innocence when encountering old age, illness, and death; his leaving behind of familial bonds and social obligations; his unrelenting quest for transcendence of the ordinary human condition; and his battles with demonic forces of evil and eventual triumphant break-through. By relating these to their own struggles and accomplishments, I hope that students will employ methods of auto-biographical writing being introduced in the English composition class, while also inspiring them to closely read and connect with the themes in the Buddhist narrative. Since the faculty are making guest appearances in each other's classes, my students are able to take advantage of the guidance and technical advice of the composition instructor during this unit, while I will be able to introduce the composition students to some elements of Buddhist doctrine and some of the historical context related to the life of the Buddha.

A second example of integration involves a three-way collaboration between the religious studies, studio art, and art history classes that asks students to produce self-portraits in the form of mandalas. The faculty member from art history has arranged for a tour of an installation of South Asian art at a local museum (planned for in-person but in the end done virtually due to COVID-19). Professor Love is then guiding all of the students in the creation of a mandala that expresses their notions of their multilayered selves and their place in the cosmos (see, e.g., Figure 4). Here, the obvious role of Buddhist studies in the collaboration is to ensure that students understand mandalas to be much more than simply decorative art. I am giving a lecture to students in all three classes in which I emphasize the rich symbolism, cultural resonances, and ritual and performative functions that mandalas have had in Asian societies.

At the end of the semester, the students across the four classes in the cluster will have compiled an e-portfolio consisting of all of the self-portraits that they produced throughout the semester, along with artist statements that introduce their works and explain their symbolism and meaning. (Some of the works will be made public on a cluster website.)⁸ During final exam week, students across the cluster will respond to a selection of these self-portraits and statements through the lenses of each discipline, looking for points of critique, interdisciplinary synergy, and integration.

⁷ See translation in (Olivelle 2008).

⁸ <http://sites.psu.edu/theself>, last accessed 2 November 2020.

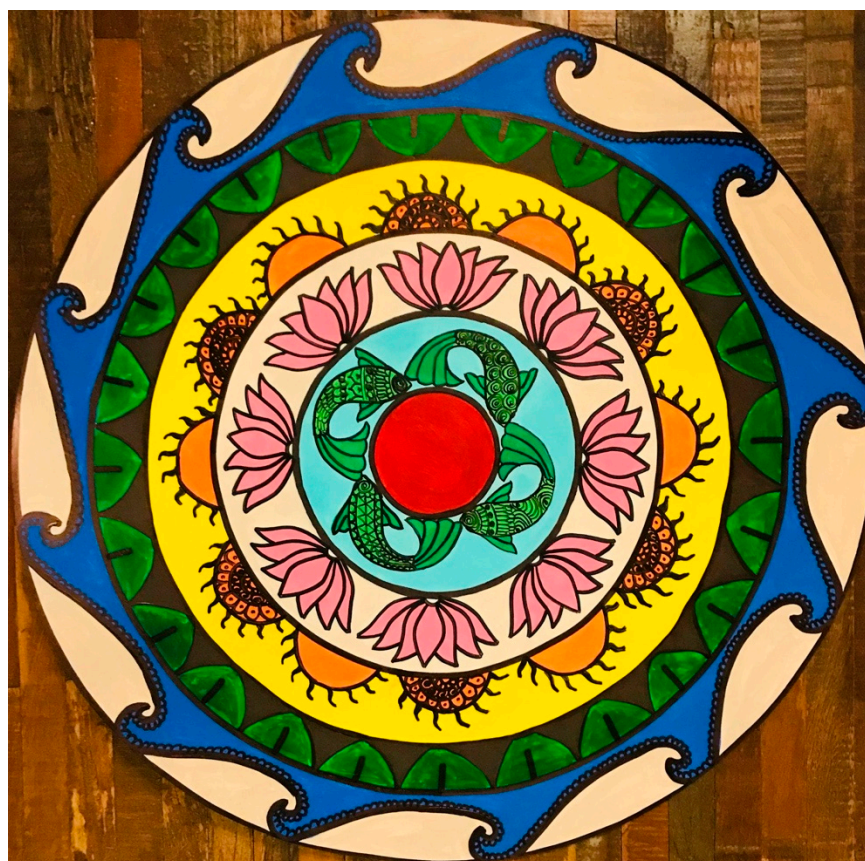


Figure 4. Chinmayi Shukla (PSU '24, and a student in my Asian religions course). "Shapes of Shakti." Acrylic and *kumkuma* powder on paper, 2020.

The Fall semester is still underway, and it is too early to list many concrete outcomes for this collaboration. However, when asked, the participating faculty have expressed to me that they feel the intersections between our classes have increased their students' engagement. Faculty also report increases in their own motivation, inspiration, and enthusiasm, and that they are thinking about different strategies for creating or grading assignments than usual. (All of this is no small accomplishment during the ill-fated 2020 academic year.) At the administrative level, the dean has expressed pleasure with how the pilot has been going. She is planning additional clusters in the future, expanding to include faculty in other programs and divisions across the college. For myself, I have utilized the interdisciplinary experiments from this cluster to develop a proposal for an integrative course focusing on Asian views of "the self" that combines religious studies and visual arts. This proposal needs to wend its way through the university bureaucracy, but I hope it will become an officially approved interdomain general education offering in the near future.

3. Discussion: Moving from Multi- to Inter- to Metadisciplinarity

The promise of interdisciplinarity is alluring. Whether in conferences, workshops, or curricula, funders, organizers, and administrators are often enthusiastic about bringing representatives from a variety of disciplines together in a joint venture. However, my experience has been that, despite best intentions, interdisciplinary collaborations often fail to produce synergy. Often, this is due to the inability of the participants to transition from multidisciplinarity to true interdisciplinarity.

I think it is easy for Buddhist studies scholars to fall into this "multidisciplinary trap." Particularly in the midst of the present-day mindfulness craze, scholars of Buddhist studies may find ourselves being invited to join in all kinds of interdisciplinary events as spokespeople for a "Buddhist perspective" on a given topic. When the event is actually

underway, however, we may belatedly come to realize that we are not being taken seriously as conversation partners. In the worst-case scenario, perhaps we discover that we have been invited primarily as a curiosity, or as a sop to someone's orientalist fantasies about our subject matter. Or, we may find that there is a genuine desire among our collaborators for synergy, but that our disciplinary commitments as critics and analysis of Buddhism place us too far outside of the group consensus for any productive conversation to actually occur. We may find ourselves unable to relate, for example, to the prescriptive goals or normative perspectives about meditation that our interlocutors are voicing. We may feel that we have to compromise too much of our critical perspective in order to fit into someone else's parameters. For any number of reasons, while different perspectives are being expressed around the seminar table, the field of Buddhist studies may not actually be an active participant in interdisciplinary dialogue.

Because I had fallen into this multidisciplinary trap on previous occasions myself, I ensured that both of my classes outlined above had built-in structural incentives to help students move from multi- to interdisciplinarity. As mentioned above, fully 40% of the students' grades in the team-taught visualization course came from their ability to articulate how they were synthesizing what they were learning in the discipline-specific lectures and projects. In the linked cluster, the intersections between classes give students in each the opportunity to receive instruction and guidance from faculty in two or three disciplines, and synthesis is required when completing joint assignments. Final projects in both of these classes have used interdisciplinary rubrics that explicitly require students to demonstrate synthesis, not just mastery of a single disciplinary approach.

However, I have learned through these experiments that truly integrative work involves paying attention not only to the structure of the course but also to the dynamics between collaborators from different fields. The first time I designed an interdisciplinary collaboration—the visualization course described above—although the course structure was successful in incentivizing synthesis, unforeseen challenges arose due to mismatches between the disciplinary cultures of the participants. A certain culture of practice emerges within a computer lab, an art studio, or a humanities classroom that largely goes unquestioned by specialists, and to which students and faculty in those fields quickly become acclimated. When these norms are left unspoken, they can develop into points of friction.

For example, early on in the visualization course, I was surprised to learn that the students and faculty members who were leading the software development component were implicitly envisioning themselves as "developers" producing the 3D objects and virtual reality simulations for a "client." Who exactly this client was was never specified, but I found that they often came to me, as the principal organizer of the collaboration, to provide vision for their projects and to ensure that I approved of their work. On the other hand, the students and faculty from the studio arts had little desire to conform to anyone's prescriptive ideas about the look and feel of their work, focusing instead on open-ended creative processes of self-expression. In that arena, artwork that seemingly failed to please the group on an aesthetic level could still be deemed to be a success if the student had engaged in an innovative or novel process. Yet again, among the psychologists, the final product was intended to be a well-structured study that met objective criteria for advanced undergraduate work in the field. Unlike in the software design field, their standards did not involve satisfying an imagined client. In contrast to the arts, articulating their creative process did not earn students credit. Either the study was well structured, the data were collected correctly, and the citations were done properly, or they were not.

Buddhist studies, of course, also brings its own unspoken assumptions and cultural idiosyncrasies to the mix that can be equally confusing or alienating to software developers, artists, psychologists, and others outside our field. As a scholar of Buddhist studies, the methods which I employ in my work and impart to students center on critical thinking about how this religion is practiced and spoken about in different historical, cultural, and social contexts. Part of the norms of the field include constantly questioning assumptions, interrogating representations, and analyzing rhetoric. While engaging in these kinds of

practices is routine for scholars and advanced students in most areas of the humanities, it is possible for those unfamiliar with our modes of interaction to misread our intellectual critique as personal criticism and to take offense. For example, if I critiqued student artwork on the basis that it represented Buddhism in a stereotyped or orientalist manner, if the artist was not familiar with the scholarly norms of my field, this could potentially be received as an assault on their creative vision. Since the latter is an element of utmost importance in the arts, I might inadvertently shatter a student's budding confidence in their artistic skills, or even stymie their interest in pursuing the arts altogether. When it is not obvious to practitioners of non-humanities disciplines what value our disciplinary culture of skepticism brings to a collaboration, we may quickly earn reputations as curmudgeonly spoil-sports—or, worse, bullies.

In order to avoid such misunderstandings, I found myself holding my tongue and not contributing as much as I could to our collaboration. Partway through the semester, however, Love and I together came to the realization that it would be more productive and collegial to directly address these kinds of cultural issues head-on, rather than to let tensions silently fester and continue to unconsciously influence our work and our interpersonal interactions. This insight led us to shift from an emphasis on interdisciplinarity to what I began to call “metadisciplinarity.”⁹ The semester ended as an unqualified success, and as mentioned, Love and I have engaged in many other equally successful interdisciplinary collaborations since. I credit a large part of this successful track record to our prioritization of this kind of meta-level discourse.

Moving from a collaboration that solely emphasizes interdisciplinary synthesis to one that also incorporates metadisciplinary dialogue means committing to being transparent about the disciplinary cultures that we each inhabit and to making our implicit expectations, assumptions, and biases visible to other participants (meaning both students and other faculty). It means taking the time to pay close attention to the social, interpersonal, and affective dimensions of the collaboration, not just the intellectual. Rather than focusing exclusively on synergies, it means that we also center the disconnections and incommensurabilities that are making collaboration difficult or even impossible. We bring into the light the unmentioned (and sometimes the unmentionable) obstacles standing in the way of our communication. This kind of work is difficult, but by taking the time for metadisciplinary reflections and conversations, we maximize the ability of all participants to contribute in the most meaningful ways possible to the collective project. In my experience, this approach also tends to redefine the goals of the project from prioritizing concrete outcomes to prioritizing ongoing relationships and prosocial interactions across institutional and intellectual divides.¹⁰

In order to participate in this kind of metadisciplinary dialogue, I have learned that we scholars of Buddhist studies need to become comfortable with articulating clearly and precisely what our field is bringing to the table when we join an interdisciplinary project. In order to be taken seriously as collaborators—and to avoid being seen as either mere curiosities or overweening critics—we need to help our interlocutors to understand and appreciate not just our tools and methods, but also our disciplinary habits. That is to say, we will likely not only need to educate many of our non-humanities colleagues and students about the methodologies of close reading, discourse analysis, historical contextualization, gender theory, critical race theory, and so forth, but we also will need to share with them

⁹ I am aware of other uses of the term metadisciplinarity. For example, (Werth 2003) and (Kalantis and Cope 2014) use the term to refer to what I would call a comprehensive, integrative vision of interdisciplinarity. On the other hand, (Dalai et al. 2018) use the term to refer to generalizable skills or methods that can be applied across different disciplinary contexts. Others have used the term essentially as a synonym of transdisciplinarity (see <http://www.eaa2017maastricht.nl/theme3>, last accessed 2 November 2020). Still others (Kane 2005) have used the term to describe the self-referential nature of the interface between theorists, the intellectual products of theorizing, and the environment being theorizing about. My use of metadisciplinarity here was arrived at independently of other writings about the term and refers primarily to the intercultural and interpersonal dimensions of collaboration, which are the contexts within which the intellectual work of multi- and interdisciplinarity takes place. I would be interested in expanding this notion to incorporate additional metadisciplinary factors, such as environment, technological tools, and (pace Kane) embodied practice, in the future.

¹⁰ See related reflections in Newman et al. (2015), Lanci (2013).

what it is like to be a person who has internalized the “hermeneutics of suspicion” so deeply that we cannot unsee them in any given situation.¹¹ We cannot simply assume that these perspectives will be readily welcomed—or that critique will be distinguishable from personal attack—by colleagues in, say, software design, unless we take the time to provide this context. We need to help others to understand not only how these perspectives are intellectually interesting, but also their essential role in ensuring a thriving interdisciplinary team.

4. What Does Buddhist Studies Bring to a Metadisciplinary Conversation?

Based on my experiences in the pedagogical collaborations I have described above, I believe that scholars of Buddhist studies are especially well positioned to make a number of important contributions to just about any interdisciplinary project. As mentioned, we have intellectual perspectives to share that are inherently valuable, not least of which is our proclivity for critical thinking.¹² However, in my view, our greatest asset as interdisciplinary collaborators may be that Buddhist studies prioritizes a number of specific orientations and soft skills that happen to be quite useful for fostering metadisciplinary conversations. Of course, these orientations are not exclusively to be found in Buddhist studies; but I would venture to say that these are some of the defining features of our field.

In the first place, it is worth mentioning that religious studies is itself already an interdisciplinary field as opposed to a discipline per se. Our “big tent” includes scholars with diverse backgrounds and training. While the majority of Buddhist studies scholars are humanists, our methodologies may primarily be historical, art historical, ethnographic, philosophical, philological, literary, or otherwise. (My own PhD, for example, is in history of medicine.) There are also significant pockets of researchers in our field who are grounded in neuroscience, cognitive science, archaeology, sociology, psychology, business, and other approaches from the sciences and social sciences. Among us are also many contemplative studies scholars, monastics, and other practitioners who engage in pastoral, theological, critical-constructive, and other “applied” modes of Buddhist studies scholarship.¹³ This internal diversity is on display at our major professional gatherings (perhaps most notably at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion), giving all of us plenty of opportunity for direct personal experience navigating among, or having to build bridges between, diverse methods and disciplinary cultures. Accordingly, even though the interdisciplinary encounters on our campuses may not center on Buddhism or the study of religion, we Buddhist studies scholars are nonetheless well prepared to participate. With a broad perspective and tolerance for disciplinary difference, I would even venture to say that we are solid choices for leadership roles in these collaborative projects, where we can play a proactive role in ensuring that they are successful.

Another obvious strength of Buddhist studies is its topical breadth. While mindfulness might be the topic *du jour*, we are not one-trick ponies. In addition to the methodological flexibility just mentioned, scholars in this field have the ability to draw from a huge range of content when deciding what material to bring into our interdisciplinary conversations. We can choose to focus on different types of source materials: text, image, orality, ritual, social practice, material culture, digital materials, and so on. We can choose to highlight gender, the environment, animals, medicine, music, food, death, or a nearly endless list of other themes. We can engage on a global or hyperlocal scale, and everything in between. Whichever of these options we might choose, we can confidently draw upon a robust body of literature by our colleagues in Buddhist studies that supports these explorations in the classroom. Because we are not locked into narrow disciplinary parameters, which direction we choose to go in is often primarily a personal decision that we can make consciously

¹¹ On the practice, advantages, and limitations of these hermeneutics of suspicion, see (Felski 2011).

¹² See also Reynolds (2004).

¹³ See also Willis (2017).

and strategically for the benefit of the interdisciplinary initiative.¹⁴ We can decide to prioritize content that helps us to build bridges with specific programs or administrative goals on our campuses (such as I did by suggesting visualization and the self as topics for the collaborations described above), or we might strategically challenge or broaden what we see as the limitations of the curricula at our institutions (such as I did by basing the team-taught course on an obscure meditation text from a remote corner of the Silk Roads instead of, say, a more obvious candidate like mindfulness). Of course, a commitment to metadisciplinary transparency means that we would always make these choices explicit, in order to help our colleagues, students, and administrators alike to appreciate how Buddhist studies is advancing and enriching the intellectual agendas of the project and the campus at large.

Another notable strength that I would draw attention to is our field's particular attunement to ferreting out essentialism wherever it may be found. Like the other advantages I am listing, this is not the exclusive domain of Buddhist studies. However, scholars in our field are likely to be especially adept at challenging Western exceptionalism, orientalist East–West dichotomies, and all kinds of other stereotypes and oversimplifications. Buddhist studies scholars love to deconstruct categories and can often easily introduce counterexamples that are anti-hegemonic. In team-teaching scenarios, this can lead the conversation into novel and unanticipated territory. For example, in one meeting of the arts and humanities cluster this past semester, I brought up the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman* (non-self) as a counterpoint to some of the assumptions about the self that arose in discussion of the Western traditions of self-portraiture and autobiographical writing. A Buddhist studies scholar can develop these comparisons into a deeper conversation, pushing back against mainstream assumptions shared by our students and colleagues by generating sincere intellectual engagement with alternative modes of thought from radically different cultural contexts.¹⁵

Another advantage that Buddhist studies scholars have that comes in handy when fostering metadisciplinary conversations is our familiarity with issues surrounding cultural difference, translation, adaptation, and hybridity. Given the direction in which our field has gone in recent decades, there is not a Buddhist studies scholar active today who has not had to think about how transnational traditions are received, transformed, and rebuilt in local cultural and social settings. Conceptual tools sharpened by thinking through these problematics are just as useful for thinking about the opportunities and challenges inherent in translating and integrating across disciplines. For example, my previous work in analyzing the translation of Buddhist healing practices into new languages and cultural contexts, which involved close examination of the use of metaphors, has attuned me to paying attention to the language that specialists use when they explain technical aspects of their field to nonspecialists.¹⁶ Sitting down with my collaborators partway through the visualization course for a metadisciplinary reflection on the language each of us were using when we are speaking to students and each other—and specific examples of congruence or discord between our metaphors—was part of how I was able to contribute to better communication among us that semester.

Finally, it is well worth mentioning that scholars in our field have the distinct advantage of being able to draw upon a considerable amount of Buddhist material related to self-awareness and self-reflexivity, much of which can be brought into the service of metadisciplinary reflection. I will not argue that these viewpoints will come naturally to all scholars in the field of Buddhist studies, but I think it is safe to say that we all know our source materials well enough to be able to identify specific ways we might better embody the balance of wisdom and compassion in our interactions with others. Buddhist studies

¹⁴ See also Hu (2017).

¹⁵ For this conversation, I specifically drew on the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* (<https://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn22/sn22.059.than.html>). See broader discussion of the concept in (Wynne 2010).

¹⁶ (Salguero 2014), and see also Waldron (2002) for a different example.

scholars might, for example, bring a certain amount of mindful attention to our interpersonal exchanges with colleagues and students, with the intention of recognizing subtle sources of tension or miscommunication before they become problematic. We may model how to name and take responsibility for our own unspoken assumptions and biases, thus exhibiting more intellectual humility and generosity. We may consciously try to bring more empathy and compassion into our words and actions in our interactions with colleagues and students. By making all of these goals explicit, we might also inspire our colleagues to resist being hyperfocused on the intellectual content, and to think about themselves and others as a community of whole people instead.¹⁷

5. Conclusion: Looking Forward

Earlier this year, Abington College launched a new minor called “Bioethics and Medical Humanities,” which we are hoping to expand to become a major in the near future. As I am one of the founding faculty members of this initiative, Buddhist studies is again at the center of an interdisciplinary collaboration on our campus. (Perhaps it is not ironic that one of the first conversations that led to the emergence of this program occurred between me and another colleague during a Tibetan sand mandala exhibition, itself a byproduct of the visualization course.)¹⁸ This new program brings together faculty in religious studies, history, Asian studies, composition, English literature, theater, studio arts, psychology, and the natural sciences. Our programming has included multiple events focusing on Asia, including guest lecturers speaking about medieval Chinese religious healing practices, Tibetan tantric responses to epidemics, and Sri Lankan apotropaics against COVID-19. My classes on Buddhism and medicine have become a core part of the program’s upper-level course offerings.

All of that being said, if the presence of Buddhist studies in this program is going to be anything more than a nod to cultural diversity, a mere token, the onus will be on me to convince my colleagues that Buddhist studies brings perspectives that are vitally important to the intellectual goals of the program as a whole. To do this, I will need not only to work with people across all of these fields to identify interdisciplinary synergies but will also need to make sure that the value of the disciplinary tools and approaches that I bring to the program is explicitly articulated in terms that are accessible to the participating faculty as well as college leadership. Of course, it behooves me to be seen as a collaborator who brings fresh ideas and intellectual clout, but I also want to be perceived as approachable, open-minded, and intellectually curious. I want to be known as someone who can help to design productive and meaningful collaborations, and who can be relied upon to mediate should any intellectual, intercultural, or interpersonal frictions arise. That is to say, in the long run, I need to have an eye not only on the interdisciplinary, but also on the metadisciplinary, dimensions of this collaboration. Happily, I am confident that I will be able to draw upon the field of Buddhist studies as a resource to help me in all of these areas.

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¹⁷ Which is a much-needed intervention; see Godfrey et al. (2018).

¹⁸ See <https://bioethics.psu.edu/news-events/bioethics-and-medical-humanities-minor-comes-to-abington-campus>, last accessed 2 November 2020.

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