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Pedagogical Possibilities: A Review of Approaches to Undergraduate Teaching in Buddhist Studies

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Abstract: This article presents a comprehensive review of the literature on teaching in Buddhist Studies within a framework of backward design, which begins by identifying our learning goals, then determining evidence of learning and planning course activities to facilitate such learning. It identifies big ideas in Buddhist Studies and transferrable skills that could serve as learning goals for our undergraduate courses. Finally, it concludes by suggesting future avenues of research about Buddhist pedagogy in the field of scholarship of teaching and learning.

Keywords: teaching; learning; pedagogy; Buddhist Studies; Buddhism; lived religion; experiential learning; contemplative learning; critical thinking; empathy



Citation: McGuire, Beverley. 2021. Pedagogical Possibilities: A Review of Approaches to Undergraduate Teaching in Buddhist Studies. *Religions* 12: 231. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12040231>

Academic Editor: Richard K. Payne

Received: 28 February 2021

Accepted: 21 March 2021

Published: 25 March 2021

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1. Introduction

This article presents a comprehensive review of the literature on teaching in Buddhist Studies within a framework of backward design (Wiggins and McTighe 2005) that encourages us to first identify our goals, then determine what would demonstrate that students had attained such goals, and finally plan our course activities so that they facilitate such learning. It identifies big ideas in Buddhist Studies and transferrable skills that could serve as learning goals for our undergraduate courses. Finally, it concludes by suggesting future avenues of research about Buddhist pedagogy in the field of scholarship of teaching and learning.

Our graduate training in Buddhist Studies and current institutional contexts influences the way we teach Buddhist Studies. In its earliest periods, Buddhist Studies predominantly focused on philology, and the ability to read and analyze Buddhist texts in their original languages remains a core part of many graduate programs. Most emphasize the need to gain facility in at least one, if not two, Asian languages including Sanskrit, Pali, classical Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and classical Tibetan. All graduate programs encourage the study of Buddhism in its cultural, historical, and social context, and depending on student and faculty research interests, they encourage students to do additional work in fields of anthropology, archaeology, art history, critical theory, ethnography, gender studies, literature, philosophy, etc. Some programs such as Michigan and UC-Santa Barbara acknowledge that students typically engage in field work or study in Asia during their graduate program. Buddhist Studies as a field is vast, as illustrated by one description: "It is possible to investigate ideas, practices, experiences, institutions, and life-worlds created by Buddhists in all times and places. Projects in this field can be focused on a single tradition or on interactions among religious groups, in a particular geographical area or across areas, and in either premodern or contemporary settings. The disciplinary range of the field is broad . . ." ¹ In other words, Buddhist Studies is a field that draws from multiple disciplines. Although we may affiliate ourselves with particular disciplines and identify the geographical area and time period of our specialization (e.g., a historian of late imperial

¹ "Buddhist Studies". *Harvard University Committee on the Study of Religion*. Available online: <https://studyofreligion.fas.harvard.edu/pages/buddhist-studies> (accessed on 28 February 2021).

Chinese Buddhism), we typically adopt interdisciplinary approaches in our research, and we often expose students to a variety of methodologies in our courses.

Given the disciplinary breadth of Buddhist Studies, why should we even try to identify learning goals particular to the field? Why not encourage our students to “think like a historian”—or philosopher, anthropologist, ethnographer, etc.—and to develop skills within those disciplines? Because we can (and we often do) do both. We teach courses in “Buddhism”, and we identify ourselves as scholars of “Buddhist Studies”. But we also encourage our students to think like a historian and a philosopher when we ask students to historically contextualize a text, but also evaluate its philosophical arguments and put it in the context of a conversation that spans centuries. Our interdisciplinarity encourages thinking across boundaries and approaching the study of Buddhism in various ways. We can be intentional about how we prepare our students to think in a way that is “both/and” rather than “either/or”. The scope of this paper does not allow for a discussion of how we might design our undergraduate programs and curricula to scaffold such learning for our students, but it does offer strategies for how we might encourage interdisciplinary thinking in our courses.

2. The Growing Field of Buddhist Pedagogy

Scholarship on undergraduate teaching in Buddhist Studies has grown slowly but steadily since the conference “Teaching Buddhism: The State of the Art”² hosted by McGill University in October of 1999, where Frank Reynolds delivered the keynote address, “Teaching Buddhism in the Postmodern University: Understanding, Critique, Evaluation” (Reynolds 2001), and which led to the publication of *Teaching Buddhism in the West* (Hori et al. 2002), edited by Victor Sōgen Hori, Richard Hayes, and Mark Shields. Stephen Berkwitz has contributed valuable scholarship that raises questions regarding the use of textbooks in our courses on Buddhism (Berkwitz 2004, 2016). For those teaching about Western or American Buddhism, he argues that popular trade books prove more useful in stimulating critical thinking, avoiding misleading understandings about the practices, thought, and identities of Buddhists in North America and Europe, and interrogating Orientalist approaches to describing and knowing the Other (Berkwitz 2004). He coins the term “Textbook Buddhism” to describe the textbooks typically begin with a discussion of the Indian context, the life story of the Buddha, teachings about karma, rebirth, the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and Dependent Origination, different forms of Buddhism (Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna) or schools, and other geographic forms such as “Western Buddhism”. Although they similarly seek to provide a comprehensive overview of Buddhism, they differ about whether to highlight coherence or diversity in regards to Buddhist traditions, and they vary in their offering of pedagogical tools (Berkwitz 2016, p. 223).

Several scholars have used Frank Reynolds’ paper (Reynolds 2001) as a springboard for further reflections on teaching Buddhism, considering ways that Buddhist ideas might inform our pedagogical practice (Tsai 2008; Sarbacker 2005). Todd Lewis has offered steadfast reminders to include narratives, ritual texts, and ethnographies in our classes to give students a sense of the devotional practices and karmic worldview of the majority of Buddhists, instead of focusing solely on elite monks and philosophical texts (Lewis 2002, 2010, 2017). Sid Brown’s personal reflections on her contemplative approach to pedagogy (Brown 2008) was followed by Judith Simmer-Brown and Fran Grace’s edited volume that included many chapters discussing the use of contemplative learning in Buddhist Studies courses (Simmer-Brown and Grace 2011). Todd Lewis and Gary DeAngelis’ *Teaching Buddhism* (Lewis and DeAngelis 2017) covered an extensive range of pedagogical challenges when teaching Buddhist studies, including how to provide students with a cogent historical narrative without oversimplification, how to redress biases and misinterpretations in early

² Although dated, the website “Teaching Buddhism” (Baen 2000) created by faculty at McGill University includes papers from the conference as well as other resources such as syllabi, textbook and film reviews, art resources, and online Buddhist texts and journals.

Buddhist studies scholarship, how to incorporate recent discussions and insights from the field of Buddhist studies, and how to engage with contemporary scientific, environmental, economic, ethical and social issues.

The 2018 AAR pre-conference workshop “Buddhism for the Liberally Educated: Today’s Buddhist Studies Classroom” brought together a sizeable group to discuss factors that influence the way we approach instruction about Buddhism, including our institutional context, our departmental culture, and the graduate programs in which we were trained. We also spoke at length about diverse approaches to the study of Buddhism, such as textual analysis, philosophical discussion, or the study of lived Buddhist traditions, which impact the way we might approach Buddhist pedagogy. Natalie Gummer stimulated further reflection about ways to address binaries and assumptions about Buddhism that our students bring to our classroom, and Kristin Scheible encouraged us to consider how the way we read influences the way we teach.

In 2019, the Buddhist Pedagogy Seminar was formed to promote critical reflection, discussion, and research about pedagogically effective approaches to teaching Buddhism. A pre-conference workshop about “Teaching Buddhist Contemplation in Higher Education” was held that same year, where presenters discussed their contemplative pedagogies, how to create a safe environment for contemplative learning, and how to bridge Buddhist contemplation with gender equality and social justice issues. The following spring, in February of 2020, Frances Garrett and Sarah Richardson hosted a three-day conference on “New Paths in Teaching Buddhist Studies” at the University of Toronto, and they developed an incredibly useful website “Teaching Buddhist Studies” (<http://teachingbuddhism.net/>, accessed on 28 February 2021) that not only includes videos of many conference presentations, but also online resources, a bibliography, and the Circled Square podcast that interviews professors about their innovative teaching methods.

3. General Considerations for Course Design and Development

When designing any undergraduate course in Buddhist Studies, first consider your end goals: what do you want students to be able to do intellectually, physically, emotionally, or socially as a result of their learning? Instead of getting caught up in how much material to cover, or what readings to include in your class, focus on what you want your students to come away understanding and remembering five to ten years from now. What learning will be significant and endure over time? Address the questions: “What’s the point? What’s the big idea here? What does this help us understand or be able to do? To what does this relate? Why should we learn this?” (Wiggins and McTighe 2005, p. 16) This is the first step of backward design of learning: identifying the learning goal(s).³ It may be foundational knowledge of Buddhist ideas, practices, and life-worlds, or application of critical thinking, writing, speaking or listening skills, or integration of ideas and experiences, or learning about themselves and others, or developing new feelings or values, or learning how to become a self-directed learner.⁴

After you have identified those goals, articulate what it would look like for your students to meet them. What would count as evidence of their understanding—be it a performance or a product? What would demonstrate that they have met your learning goals? Although we may default to a paper or exam to assess our students’ learning, we need not limit the types of learning artifacts that might demonstrate that our students have met your learning goals.

Finally, plan learning experiences and instructional activities that will help students meet those goals. What knowledge and skills might your students need to achieve your learning goals, and what learning activities can equip them with those skills? Choosing the

³ I use “goal(s)” because I recognize that we typically target several goals in our courses, but I tend to agree with colleagues who advocate focusing on one overall conceptual goal (McGovern 2020) or focusing on a single skill, such as public speaking, empathy, etc. (Garrett n.d.). One resource for helping instructors articulate learning goals is the “Learning Goals Inventory” (Barkley and Major 2016).

⁴ Here I follow the taxonomy of significant learning, that distinguishes between foundational knowledge, application, integration, human dimension, caring, and learning how to learn (Fink 2013, p. 35).

best learning method, such as experiential learning, collaborative learning, inquiry-guided learning, problem-based learning, etc.⁵ In other words, plan your instruction after you identify your desired results and assessments, so that the learning goals, activities, and assessments align with each other.

Ultimately, we should teach for transfer. That is, we want our students to be able to transfer what they have learned in our class to new settings, to be able to use their understanding creatively and flexibly in the future. We can craft our activities and assessment to encourage such transfer, and we can provide practice opportunities, coaching, and feedback for how to apply their learning to new issues or cases (Wiggins and McTighe 2005, p. 59).

Regardless of the learning goal, consider your students' expectations so that you can effectively communicate the value of that learning to your students. Students learn best when addressing questions that they care about or goals they want to reach (Bain 2004, p. 31). As Barbara Walvoord has noted, student goals for taking courses in religion often differ from faculty goals: they typically hope to grow spiritually or religiously, while their instructors seek to develop their critical thinking skills (Walvoord 2008). If we can overcome this "great divide," which usually leads to a lack of motivation (Walvoord 2008; Gravett 2018), we can instead create the opportunity for deep learning. We can motivate our students by connecting material to their interests, providing authentic, real-world tasks, and showing relevance to their current academic lives or future professional lives (Ambrose et al. 2010, pp. 83–84).

Our students come to our class with mental models and paradigms that shape how they construct meaning, and when they encounter new material, they try to understand it in terms of something they already know (Bain 2004, p. 26). As scholars have pointed out, our students' prior knowledge can help or hinder their learning (Ambrose et al. 2010). If accurate, it can provide a strong foundation for building new knowledge; if not, it can impede their learning. We can activate their prior knowledge by asking them questions about their preconceptions of Buddhism, through a low-stakes assessment or self-assessment, or brainstorming and generating concept maps as a group (Ambrose et al. 2010, pp. 28–30). Scholars have identified common misconceptions about Buddhism that our students might bring to our classes (Buswell and Lopez 2014; Lewis 2010; Faure 2009). These include: all Buddhists meditate, the primary form of Buddhist meditation is mindfulness, all Buddhists are vegetarian, all Buddhists are pacifists, Buddhism is atheistic, Buddhism is a philosophy not a religion, and Zen is dedicated to the experience of "sudden enlightenment," which frees its followers from the extended regimens of training in ethics, meditation, and wisdom found in conventional forms of Buddhism (Buswell and Lopez 2014). It takes carefully designed instruction to help wean students from their misconceptions, such as repeated opportunities to apply new, accurate knowledge, or asking students to justify their reasoning. If we consider the misconceptions above, some of the more trenchant ones require more sustained examination over the course of the semester.

In addition to their motivation and prior knowledge, we must consider our students' social and emotional experiences that impact how they engage in the learning process. Attending to our students' wellbeing impacts their persistence in college and their sense of being valued as a whole person (Harward 2016). Supporting our students' wellbeing has become increasingly important in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing public incidents of systemic racism. Trauma-sensitive pedagogy encourages us to consider how our teaching practices embody a holistic concern for our students, offering support and allowing students to determine the extent to which they will engage with potentially triggering materials (Crompton 2020, p. 34). Trauma disrupts and interferes with our sense of self and experience of the world; it affects our ability to focus, retain, and process

⁵ For those who identify a goal from the Learning Goal Inventory, a helpful resource of learning assessment techniques tied to the six domains of learning is (Barkley and Major 2016, pp. 71–404).

information; and it can lead to withdrawal and isolation (Stephens 2020, p. 5). We want to create a predictable learning environment and a supportive learning community where students can restore their sense of voice, choice, and agency. We can check-in with our students to gauge how they are feeling, provide choices about assignments whenever possible, and incorporate “one minute” papers at the end of class or other means to solicit their feedback (Angelo and Cross 1993).⁶ We can show our students that we care about their wellbeing: Sid Brown distributes handouts to her students about sleep deprivation (Brown 2008, pp. 131–35) and doing/being well in college (Brown 2008, pp. 145–50), and Frances Garrett’s course “Biohacking Breath” employs a trauma-informed pedagogy and addresses her students’ wellbeing explicitly (Bergot 2021).

4. Big Ideas in Buddhist Studies

This section examines big ideas that could be targeted as learning goals in an undergraduate course in Buddhist Studies, and how one might backward design evidence and facilitation of such learning in our courses. Big ideas help students hold together content knowledge, and they are often ideas at the core of our disciplines. As Wiggins and McTighe write, “A big idea is therefore both central to coherent connections in a field of study *and* a conceptual anchor for making facts more understandable and useful” (Wiggins and McTighe 2005, p. 68). Big ideas help students connect and organize facts, skills and experiences; they are at the heart of expert understanding of a discipline. They may be a helpful concept, theme, ongoing debate, paradox, theory, underlying assumption, recurring question, understanding, or principle (Wiggins and McTighe 2005, p. 70). “Critical terms” could serve as big ideas—for example, Buddha, belief, body, death, experience, history, institution, person, power, practice, relic, ritual, sex, word, modernity (Lopez 2005; Taylor 1998)—depending on how they are framed, as they can provide conceptual lenses through which our students might approach the study of Buddhism. Here I propose preliminary, provisional big ideas for Buddhist Studies in order to stimulate further discussion and reflection on what we might identify as conceptual bottlenecks and sticking points in our field.

4.1. *There Is No Single Way to Approach the Study of Buddhism*

Buddhist Studies is an interdisciplinary field: we approach the study of Buddhism from many different methods. The Buddhist notion of “skillful means” (*upāya-kauśalya*) resonates with this sort of methodological pluralism.⁷ Our disciplinary approaches can come into conflict—for example, philosophers want to determine if a particular view is true, while philologists maintain it should be understood within the text and its historical setting (Siderits 2017, p. 12). But the field of Buddhist Studies accommodates both approaches, which allows us a range of pedagogical possibilities. We can adopt a particular discipline in our courses—for example, introducing Clifford Geertz’s notion of “thick description” to our students and encouraging them to use that anthropological lens to approach materials in the course—or we can draw from multiple disciplines. Julius Tsai describes an example of the latter in his undergraduate Buddhism course where he starts with “Early Buddhism” that contextualizes the life and teachings of the Buddha in India, “Buddhism on the Silk Road” that examines cave art at Dunhuang, “Buddhism in Tibet” that explores Vajrayāna Buddhism through a pilgrimage narrative, “The Ghost Festival and Chinese Buddhism” that considers the tension between Buddhist monasticism and Chinese ancestral religion, “Zen Monastic Life” that includes an ethnographic account of contemporary monastic life in Korea, and “Buddhism Comes West” that considers immigrant and convert communities in North America, Buddhism and Western psychology, and socially engaged Buddhism

⁶ Typically, “one minute” papers have students respond to two questions: What was the most important thing you learned in class today? What question is unanswered? However, it could also include questions about their emotional and physical wellbeing.

⁷ Although, as Julius Tsai notes, this should not lead us to overlook substantive differences between the two, as “skillful means” functioned historically in the context of inter-sectarian competition as new communities sought to legitimate themselves (Tsai 2008, p. 161).

(Tsai 2008, p. 160). His course draws from disciplines of history, art history, anthropology, ethnography, and psychology.

If this is our goal, we want evidence that our students appreciate the multiple methods for approaching the study of Buddhism. We might assess that learning through essays or papers where they explore multiple ways of analyzing a particular source, or if we have them adopt a particular methodology to interpret their source materials, we may have them reflect on how their analysis may have changed if they had used another methodology. We could assess that learning by having them divide into groups—historians, anthropologists, philosophers, etc.—and consider how they might address a common question from their particular discipline. Each group could model their approach—what questions they asked, what materials they consulted, and how they constructed their argument—so that students gain a multidisciplinary perspective and understand the strengths and weaknesses of each approach, and types of paths that are opened and foreclosed by particular methods.

We can help our students understand this big idea by making explicit the discipline(s) that we incorporate into our courses, noting instances where scholars are drawing on those disciplinary conventions, and considering how the analysis might change if approached from another disciplinary perspective. When our students read texts, view images, watch documentaries, or do site visits, we can encourage them to consider the ways they might interrogate and interpret materials from those disciplinary lenses. In other words, we want to provide opportunities for them to think like a philosopher, a historian, an art historian, an anthropologist, an ethnographer, a critical theorist, a literary scholar, etc. When our students become adept at thinking within various disciplines, they can make informed decisions about the methods that they might want to employ in their own research and writing.

4.2. *“Buddhism” Is a Constructed Category with an Intellectual History, Not an Objective Reality*

The term “Buddhism” is a construct that arose in a particular European colonial context, and it continues to exert its influence on contemporary understandings and assumptions about Buddhism. As Stephen Jenkins notes, “In studying Buddhism we are not treating a static external object. What we perceive is powerfully conditioned and contextualized by our own culturally defined ways of seeing” (Jenkins 2002, p. 71). This provides the opportunity for students to consider the construction of knowledge, the epistemological assumptions that have shaped Buddhist Studies, and how our own biases and assumptions can skew our understanding of other cultures and traditions. When we unearth the intellectual history of the term “Buddhism,” we allow our students to discover why today they might assume that Buddhism is a philosophy instead of a religion, or that all Buddhists meditate. We discuss the “Protestant presuppositions” that led Eugène Burnouf and others to look for Buddhism in texts, rather than archaeological and epigraphical materials, and to then disseminate an elite monastic idealization of Buddhism from scriptures and monastic codes as if they accurately reflected the lives of Buddhist monks in early India (Schopen 1991, p. 5). These early scholars of Buddhism construed an “original Buddhism” largely from philosophical texts, and they distinguished this transhistorical essence from its local cultural manifestations. As Donald Lopez notes, “This hypostatized object, called “Buddhism,” because it had been created by Europe, could also be controlled by it, and it was against this Buddhism that all of the Buddhisms of the modern Orient were to be judged, and to be found lacking” (Lopez 1995, p. 7).⁸ As Charles Hallisey demonstrates, such projections of Buddhism were created in concert with Asian interlocutors in a process of “intercultural mimesis”: for example, Rhys David’s representation of early Buddhism as rationalist and free of ritual derived not only from his assumptions and expectations, but the views and examples of the monks he met in Sri Lanka (Hallisey 1995, p. 47).

⁸ If we wanted to broaden the scope of our discussion, we could include the work of scholars who have similarly problematized the category of “religion” as a colonial European construction that was applied as a universal concept (e.g., Masuzawa 2005; Asad 1993).

We want our students to be self-reflective about the biases and assumptions that they bring to the study of Buddhism, and we can offer the history of Buddhist Studies as a cautionary tale about the intellectual hubris of speaking for Buddhism, how our assumptions (about what Buddhism is, and where it is found) can create blind-spots that lead to inaccurate representations, and how the materials we choose and methodologies we employ impact the way that we portray Buddhists and Buddhist traditions. We can surface our students' assumptions from the outset, generating a list or mind-map of their prior knowledge or associations with Buddhism. We can target our instruction to address their particular misconceptions. In instances where Orientalist views about Asia, Buddhism, or Zen come to the fore—such as stereotypes about the rational West and the spiritual East—we can assign portions of Edward Said's (1978) *Orientalism* or Jane Iwamura's (2011) *Virtual Orientalism*, or incorporate scholarship in Buddhist Studies that explores the hold of Orientalism on the Western imagination (Faure 2003; Lopez 1993).

We can assess student learning in essays and papers by examining the degree to which they explain the rationale behind the sources and methodologies they use, acknowledge the scope of their argument, and qualify their statements about "Buddhism" to avoid generalizations and essentialism.

Stephen Jenkins describes how he starts with playful thought experiments that draw from the students' everyday experience and then moves to the historical encounter of Buddhism and the West (Jenkins 2002, p. 77). To help them understand what it means to have a worldview, he has them reflect on the popular culture of their school, or consider a description of an exotic religion with ritual cannibalism at its center, where people eat the body and drink the blood of their God (Christianity), and whose central symbol is an instrument of torture (the cross) (Jenkins 2002, p. 78). He starts by having his students consider who they are, and then what characterizes dominant American religious predispositions in the hopes that students become self-reflective. To underscore the importance of such self-examination when engaging Buddhism, he gives them an example of "a hermeneutical feedback loop characterized as the "pizza effect" (Jenkins 2002, p. 81):

Although pizza has some old Italian antecedents, American pizza as we know it was largely a product of Italian-American cooking. However, pizza-loving American tourists, going to Italy in the millions, sought out authentic Italian pizza. Italians, responding to this demand, developed pizzerias to meet American expectations. Delighted with their discovery of "authentic" Italian pizza, Americans subsequently developed chains of "authentic" Italian brick-oven pizzerias. Hence, Americans met their own reflection in the other and were delighted.

(Jenkins 2002, p. 81)⁹

After his students have examined themselves, how they construct others, and the "pizza effect," Jenkins has his students consider the figures of Henry Olcott and Madame Blavatsky, Dharmapāla's presentation of the Buddha as a rational philosopher, and Walpola Rahula's (1974) *What the Buddha Taught*. When they experience "shock and dismay" moving to Mahāyāna, he uses it as a teaching opportunity for reflecting on the origin of such dismay: not only their American predispositions, but also the view presented by Rahula (Jenkins 2002, p. 83). This intentional sequencing of activities can give students a palpable sense of the "intercultural mimesis" that characterized the early history of Buddhist Studies.

4.3. "Buddhist" Is a Contested Category, Not an Objective Reality

In a similar vein, "Buddhist" is a contested category, and we can have our students reflect on the questions: Who is a Buddhist? What makes someone Buddhist? Who gets to decide what qualifies as "Buddhist?" (Prebish 2017; Berkwitz 2004) When we do this in class, it quickly elucidates the complexity of religious identity as well as issues authority and power, and it allows the opportunity to consider why some are left out of our

⁹ Today we could use the example of yoga studios or mindfulness practices, which have made their way to Asia in a similar feedback loop.

field of vision, such as children (Sasson 2017, p. 240). This topic appears prominently in scholarship on Buddhism in America, where typologies of Buddhists have been discussed and debated (Hickey 2010; Cadge 2005; Numrich 2003; Gregory 2001; Bielefeldt et al. 2001; Prebish 1999; Nattier 1998; Fields 1998; Tweed 1998; Numrich 1996; Prebish 1978, 1993). You can follow-up to the general inquiry by running through the gamut of questions raised by Charles Prebish: “Does ‘taking refuge’ establish Buddhist identity? How about membership in a Buddhist community? Does attending meditation sessions, regularly or irregularly, make one Buddhist? Does donating money to a Buddhist community give one Buddhist identity? What about regular attendance at temple services?” (Prebish 2017, p. 217) If they suggest self-identification as a means of settling the debate—that anyone who says they are Buddhist should be counted as Buddhist (Tweed 1998, pp. 79–80; Prebish 1999, p. 56)—you can remind them that it may include those who have never engaged in Buddhist practice or participated in a Buddhist group, and it may exclude those deeply involved in Buddhism who self-identify as members of other religions (Gregory 2001, p. 237).

Stephen Berkwitz adopts another approach to examining issues about the formation of religious identity and internal diversity within religious traditions: he has his students read popular trade books written by Buddhist teachers in the West (Berkwitz 2004). He encourages his students to consider how different voices from within the tradition seek to define Buddhism and to reflect on those definitions as “changeable and conditioned discursive representations rather than unchanging and self-revealing objective facts” (Berkwitz 2004, p. 144). Because such works are intended for western audiences, they can allow students to consider the ways in which authors may focus on elements appealing to those audiences, and critiques that may be off-limits so as not to alienate them (Ibid., pp. 148–49). Although scholars often dismiss such works for being uncritical and shallow, Berkwitz writes, “these weaknesses make them exceptionally useful as pedagogical tools to foster critical thinking, nuanced insights, and a reflective self-awareness of one’s scholarly position and cultural background” (Ibid., p. 151). He shares exercises that can be useful, such as comparing ancient Buddhist texts with modern Buddhist teachers to distinguish the different intended audiences and portrayals of the Buddhist path, listing important Buddhist concepts left out of trade paperback authors’ depictions and offering reason why they were omitted, and having them visit a local Buddhist temple and discuss differences between the trade paperback and observations of people practicing Buddhism (Ibid., pp. 151–52).

4.4. *Buddhism Is a Lived Religion Embedded in Cultural, Social and Political Contexts*

Buddhism is not separate from everyday life, but expressed and experienced in people’s lives. This idea not only challenges the misconception that Buddhism is a philosophy not a religion, but also draws attention to the beliefs, practices and everyday experiences of Buddhists. Although early scholars of Buddhist Studies gave primacy to texts over archaeological and epigraphical materials, effectively excluding the practices and beliefs of Buddhist monks and lay people, because of Protestant assumptions that located religion in scripture (Schopen 1991, p. 14), and subsequent scholarship largely focused on elite monastic texts and traditions, later studies have considered lay practitioners or householders for whom ritual activity is their primary medium of “being Buddhist” (Lewis 2017, p. 124). As Todd Lewis remarks, “To focus solely on elite texts designed to guide the rare meditation master or philosopher is to miss the center of Buddhism in society and in history” (Ibid., p. 125). Most instructors agree about the importance of teaching about practices and rituals, not just philosophy (DeAngelis 2017; Willis 2017; Lai n.d.), and that they try to “help students see the human in the Buddhist tradition” (Sasson 2017, p. 247) and “look through the eyes” of religious practitioners and their lived experience (DeAngelis 2017, p. 206). Lewis recommends that students not only read philosophical treatises but also narratives including the collections of *jātaka* and *avadāna*, texts about religious practices, and ethnographic case studies of specific Buddhist communities and

their ritual traditions (Lewis 2002, 2017). This will enable students to see how Buddhists throughout history have primarily focused on acquiring merit rather than seeking *nirvana* realization (Lewis 2002, 2017; DeAngelis 2017, p. 208).

This big idea also encourages students to consider the social and political dimensions of Buddhists' lived reality. Buddhists have played important roles in social change, cultural transformation, and globalization in the modern world (Queen 2017). They have been involved with political, leaders, states and governments from the time of Ashoka to recent reformists and militant Buddhists in Myanmar, Thailand, and Sri Lanka (Borchert and Harris 2017). We can use such examples to challenge stereotypes of Buddhism as a peaceful religion (McGovern 2020; Housiaux 2020; Sasson 2017, p. 239), and to try to understand how violence arises, is perceived, and countered within local contexts. Some instructors incorporate clips of the Buddhist monk Wirathu, the documentary entitled "An Unholy Alliance: Monks and the Military in Myanmar," a *New York Times* article (Arnold and Turner 2018), and Francis Wade's *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other"* (Wade 2017).¹⁰ Nathan McGovern uses a short documentary about the Rohingya in Myanmar produced by Nicholas Kristof (2014) and raises the question of why Buddhists like Wirathu would engage in racism and violence when it goes against the Buddha's teachings. McGovern wants his students to understand that "Buddhism historically, like every other religion, has not respected a distinction between religion and the secular. That means that religious nationalism, and all the dangers associated with it, can arise in a Buddhist society just as it has in societies with other religious majorities." (McGovern 2020).

Some argue that introductory courses in Buddhism should focus on the lives of contemporary Buddhists. Frank Reynolds says that instead of a survey that begins with the life of the Buddha, rapidly proceeds through 2500 years of history, and ends with a cursory glance at contemporary Buddhist traditions around the world, introductory courses in Buddhism should focus on "a broadly representative variety of the real worlds, of real Buddhists, who are involved in real Buddhist practices that both generate and express real Buddhist experiences." (Reynolds 2001, p. 11). Jan Willis shares how she has offered narratives showing Buddhism as a lived tradition, as well as documentaries such as the documentary *Zen Buddhism: In Search of Self* that depicts the life of Buddhist monastics and *Dhamma Brothers* that gives a sense of "engaged Buddhism" (Willis 2017, p. 153).

Experiential learning activities, site visits, and study abroad provide opportunities for students to appreciate Buddhism as a lived religion. Assignments that provide students an opportunity to experientially engage with Buddhism in their everyday lives include trying to live according to the five precepts for several days (Fort 2011; Tsai 2008; Wotypka 2002), identifying a problem in contemporary society and creating and drawing a bodhisattva that could be appealed to for guidance (Wotypka 2002), and engaging in "analogous activities" that resemble Buddhist practices (McGuire 2019). Victor Sōgen Hori divides his class into groups and has them compose a "linked verse" (*renku* 句) together, with the aim that they learn through mutual criticism and support, and they write as a Japanese person would from a world of aesthetic feeling—the "haiku" use of language: "the use of language to "present" the object, the moment, the emotion as it is in itself and not to "represent" it through imposed metaphors, philosophical interpretation and personal points of view" (Hori 2002, p. 189). Rick Jarow describes an embodied pedagogical approach that he takes by engaging in "peripatetic experiments" where he holds a walking class outside: students pay attention to what they hear, feel, and see as they walk through campus and reflect on particular questions tied to their study of Buddhism (Rick Jarow 2002, p. 113).

4.5. Buddhism Is Diverse, Dynamic, and Historically Conditioned

Buddhism is not uniform or static, but instead internally diverse and dynamic. Students should understand the diversity of Buddhism—that it is not monolithic (Williams

¹⁰ A helpful resource for pre-2014 sources is (Jerryson 2015).

2008; Housiaux 2020; Amar n.d.)—and gain an awareness of its historical contexts and development. Julius Tsai identifies this as one of his primary goals: “a rudimentary historical consciousness, moving from thinking about religion in a vague, ill-defined way to thinking about religious communities as dynamic, historically conditioned human communities.” (Tsai 2008, p. 160).

Andrew Housiaux shows his students the internal diversity of Buddhism by having them examine how passages from the Pali canon—specifically, the encounter between the Buddha, Ānanda and Mahāpajāpati where the Buddha says that women can attain liberation but also relegates them to second-class status in the monastic community—have been interpreted in different ways. When they learn about current debates surrounding the restoration of the bhikkhunī lineage, they appreciate the relevance of these passages today. Seeing how later Buddhists use or challenge the Buddha’s words, they understand that religious traditions are contested, and that interpretation is an ongoing, living process (Housiaux 2020).

4.6. The Academic Study of Buddhism Is Different from the Practice of Buddhism

We want students to be able to bracket their religious beliefs from their academic study of Buddhism. Bracketing entails setting aside their own assumptions so they can adopt as neutral a stance as possible and consider alternative ways of viewing the world and how they make sense to other people (Gallagher and Maguire 2019, p. 43). They need to distinguish between academic statements and confessional/apologetic ones. They should understand that the academic study of Buddhism entails critically examining Buddhist ideas and practices in their historical and cultural contexts, not judging them “right” or “wrong”, or “authentic” and “inauthentic”. For introductory courses, I have found Russell McCutcheon’s brief essay—“What is the Academic Study of Religion?” (McCutcheon 2017)—helpful for distinguishing between descriptive and normative judgments, as well as non-evaluative comparison.

Such bracketing need not imply that we abandon any attempt to connect with our students’ personal lives, values, and experiences, which can impact student motivation and undermine integrative learning goals (Gravett 2018, p. 26). We can provide them opportunities to reflect on how their study of Buddhism has impacted their own worldview through journals and other reflective writing, giving them space to integrate their learning with their personal and religious lives. Charles Hallisey notes how texts always precede and exceed us, and that alongside philological and historical practices of interpretation, we might allow our sources to “open up before us and lead us” rather than try to control them (Hallisey 2012, p. 75). We can make this explicit to our students—that Buddhist texts, images, and practices may resonate with them on existential, personal, and religious levels—and that they can engage with the materials in those ways outside the purview of the course. We can acknowledge the way in which “the academic study of religion can put their own tradition into perspective, and act as a sort of mirror whereby one comes to understand one’s own religious identity in a more sophisticated light” (Sarbacker 2005, p. 271).

In order to distinguish between the academic study and religious practice of Buddhism, we should be careful when incorporating contemplative practices in our classes. For those who teach at public institutions—but arguably for those who teach at private colleges and universities as well—we should design and frame activities that are secular, but “analogous” enough to provide a third point of reference that allows them to pivot between their understanding of Buddhism and those of practitioners and scholars of Buddhism (McGuire 2019). If they want to engage in the practice of Buddhist meditation, we can direct them to opportunities to explore meditation through local Buddhist centers or summer programs such as Woodenfish’s Monastic Life Program (<https://www.woodenfish.org/>, accessed on 28 February 2021).

As an undergraduate, I felt fortunate that one of my mentors was both a professor of Religious Studies and dean of Stanford Memorial Church, because he raised critical

questions in the classroom that he would also ponder from the pulpit. He modeled how one could have a religious life yet critically approach the study of religion, and I could go to him with my spiritual questions as well as my academic concerns. However, he would never proselytize or preach in the classroom. My professors of Buddhist Studies who identify as scholar-practitioners have similarly respected such boundaries in the classroom. As Ian Reader notes, the integrity of our field relies on our ability to examine, analyze, and critique religion, and we should strive for objectivity even if it is an ideal rather than a practical possibility (Reader 2008, pp. 85–86).

Most of us were drawn to the field because of our personal empathy for Buddhism—this comes across strikingly in the Cirled Square podcast that examines Buddhist Studies in Higher Education¹¹—and we may encourage our students to cultivate a sympathetic understanding of Buddhism, but we should not advocate for Buddhism in the classroom. As Duncan Williams notes, “This is a role we can play at the temple, if we choose” (Williams 2008, p. 60). Jan Willis similarly distinguishes between what is appropriate for the classroom as opposed to the dharma hall or meditation room (Willis 2017, p. 159). Scholars can serve as a resource for Buddhist communities and explore how their research might inform contemporary Buddhist thought and practice (Gross 2017; Makransky 2008), or explore how Buddhism might address current issues, engaging in what has been called “Buddhist critical-constructive reflection” (Makransky 2008, p. 125). This need not involve conflating such constructive possibilities with their pedagogical responsibilities.

5. Transferrable Skills

Whereas the previous section explored big ideas specific to the field of Buddhist Studies, this section considers transferrable skills that we can target as learning goals in our courses, and how one might backward design evidence and facilitation of such learning in our courses. The transferrable skills identified below—close reading, writing, speaking and listening, critical thinking, and empathy—map onto the essential learning outcomes identified by the American Association of Colleges and Universities.¹² Because we often teach courses within a general education curriculum, we want to ensure that students can transfer and integrate what they learn to the nonacademic world (Hanstedt 2012). Integrative learning often occurs when students address real-world problems that require multiple areas of knowledge and modes of inquiry, and when they offer multiple solutions that draw from multiple perspectives.¹³ We can equip them with skills of analysis, communication, critical thinking, and empathy that will facilitate such multimodal inquiry and problem-solving outside of the classroom.

5.1. Close Reading

Most of us were trained to be close readers, and we want our students to be able to critically analyze and interpret written texts, visual images, or material artifacts in their cultural, historical and social context. As Paul Griffiths notes, hermeneutics in Buddhist Studies involves understanding what the texts are about, being able to place the text in its historical context—“both in the broad sense of tracing continuities and discontinuities with the earlier tradition, and in the narrower sense of seeing how a given text fits into the larger corpus of its author” (Griffiths 1981, p. 19)—as well as its socio-cultural context to show how forms of thought arose in particular societies, and restating what one takes to be the meaning of the text in terms other than those used by the authors. We can help our students distinguish between reading to understand and reading to critique: the former involves identifying the central point, context, arguments, evidence, assumptions that shape the

¹¹ *The Cirled Square: Buddhist Studies in Higher Education*. Available online: <https://buddhiststudies.utoronto.ca/programs/podcast/> (accessed on 26 February 2021).

¹² With the exception of quantitative literacy, they encompass all of the “Intellectual and Practical Skills,” and they address the skills of intercultural knowledge and lifelong learning within “Personal and Social Responsibility”. See “Essential Learning Outcomes”. *Association of Colleges and Universities*. Available online: <https://www.aacu.org/essential-learning-outcomes> (accessed on 28 February 2021).

¹³ This is made explicit in the “Integrative and Applied Learning VALUE Rubric” (AACU 2009b).

arguments, and conventions of presentation, whereas the latter entails assessing strengths and weaknesses, elaborating the implications of assumptions, testing theory against data, comparing alternative arguments, and assessing whether an argument accomplishes what it claims to (Gallagher and Maguire 2019, p. 94). When we ask our students to “unpack” quotations, for example, we expect them to demonstrate their understanding by stating their interpretation in their own words and put the text in its broader context.

Teaching the interpretive practice of reading is one way of responding to post-truth culture that values opinions more than facts and has many outlets for spreading those opinions (Carillo 2018, p. 7). To counter such tendencies, we can allow students to personally reflect on their reading processes—how and why they arrived at their reading (Carillo 2018, p. 21)—so they have an outlet for expressing their own experience before participating in reading as an act of critical empathy where they imaginatively put themselves in the place of others. We can model reading for our students, pausing regularly to explain how we draw connections to the historical world, our contemporary world, and to other texts (Carillo 2018, p. 81; Brown n.d.). My own mentor, Robert Gimello, masterfully modeled close reading in his classes. He would sit on the desk at the front of the room with the *Vimalakirti Sutra* in hand, reading aloud and pausing at opportune moments to look out and ask us questions that elicited such connections. He modeled a slow, critical pace to reading, stopping whenever it merited further consideration.

Another way we can encourage close reading is by providing our students with annotated texts where we highlight the various rhetorical moves of scholars—where they inquire into a subject, raise questions, present interpretations, cite evidence in support, etc.—to push against the tendency for students to simply report and re-present their research (Carillo 2018, p. 83). In a similar vein, we can encourage our students to see literature reviews as an opportunity for creative inquiry instead of regurgitation of names and ideas—as “a construction and a creation that emerges out of the dialogue between the reviewer and the field” (Montuori 2005, p. 2).

We can teach our students how to read carefully and mindfully, resisting ubiquitous digital distractions. We can push against the tendency for students to view “reading as downloading, main-point gleaning, bullet-point grabbing, gist getting, plot summarizing” and “reading as the act of identification and gratification” (Miller 2016, p. 155). Richard Miller teaches courses that create space for deliberation, speculation, and reflection, following five rules of “reading in slow motion”: one book; 15–20 pages a week; no reading ahead; meeting once a week for 3 h; no technology in class (Miller 2016, p. 156). He writes, “The students know how to decipher the words on the page; what they lack is experience moving out from those words to the host of possible contexts—real and imagined—that give those specific words weight and meaning.” (Miller 2016, pp. 158–59). Together in class, they read attentively, paying attention to nuances and cultivating curiosity.

Students can engage in a similar process of “close looking” where they develop visual literacy—the ability to interpret and evaluate images and visual media, as well as understand and analyze the contextual, cultural, aesthetic, and intellectual components involved in their production and use¹⁴—instead of projecting their own histories onto objects they see and encounter. Not only can we model close looking at Buddhist images with our students, but we can also take students to museums (Chou n.d.). Sid Brown gives the example of an uncritical thinker as someone who leaves the movie thinking “that was good,” while the critical thinker articulates why they liked the movie, how it affects their world, and the filmmakers’ worldview and assumptions (Brown 2008, pp. 143–45).

¹⁴ Adapted from the definition of “visual literacy” developed by the Association of College & Research Libraries: “Visual literacy is a set of abilities that enables an individual to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, use, and create images and visual media. Visual literacy skills equip a learner to understand and analyze the contextual, cultural, ethical, aesthetic, intellectual, and technical components involved in the production and use of visual materials”. See “ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education”. Last modified 27 October 2011. Available online: <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/visualliteracy> (accessed on 28 February 2021).

5.2. Writing

To teach for transfer of writing skills, we should help our students think rhetorically about writing—the purpose, audience, and genre. We can ask questions such as: Who are my intended readers, and how much do they already know? What is my purpose for writing? What do I want my readers to know, believe, or do after reading my work? What genre is most appropriate for my context, and what style, language, and document design does the genre require? (Bean 2011, p. 40) When students develop these rhetorical thinking skills, they can transfer their learning from one writing context to another (Bean 2011; Moore and Bass 2017).

As with any skill, we first want to activate their prior knowledge by cueing or prompting them to encourage retrieval of such knowledge. We can ask them about their previous writing experience: who (audience), why (purpose), and how (genre) they wrote about particular topics or issues. We can scaffold their development of writing skills into chunks, allowing them plenty of opportunities to practice low-stake writings in a variety of forms, so they can better distinguish between genres including reflection papers, op-ed pieces, and academic essays. For example, students can engage in creative writing such as stories or personal essays that engage with the themes of the course,¹⁵ but also produce articles that are “hard-edged, secular, editorial, and critical” (Grimes 2002, p. 165). In his “Writing Religion” course, Ronald Grimes encourages his students to “sit with words”—“attending, dwelling, pausing, and taking time with words” (Ibid., p. 167)

If we assign a final research paper, we can scaffold the assignment into stages. We might start with a brainstorming session where they develop research questions, an annotated bibliography about their sources, an outline or overview where they present their positions, points, and takeaways, portions of their work shared for peer feedback, a full draft for peer review, and their final draft along with a “writer’s memo” or “revision memo” where they reflect on aspects they consider effective, what they think could be improved and how, and the process they used to write and whether it was effective. We can encourage our students to adopt a rhetorical perspective about their research-based writing by distinguishing between sources they use as background, evidence, argument, and method (Bizup 2008).¹⁶ We can give feedback to encourage them to improve the clarity and persuasiveness of their writing, emphasizing that writing not only involves a sequential process of planning, drafting, and revising, but also an iterative process with multiple opportunities for revision and feedback until their writing becomes clear, coherent, and compelling.

We can make our writing assignments transparent by being explicit about the purpose of the assignment (skills and knowledge gained), the task (what they will do and how they will do it), and the criteria for success (a checklist or rubric) (Winkelmes et al. 2019). Providing annotated examples of excellent writing can also make our expectations transparent: for example, we might highlight an example of a clearly articulated thesis, counter-argument, or persuasive marshalling of evidence. Finally, we can direct students to writing guides freely available online, including *A Guide to Writing in Religious Studies* (Halpern et al. 2007) and *A Student’s Guide to Writing in East Asian Studies* (Radich n.d.).

5.3. Speaking and Listening

To teach for transfer of speaking skills, we can similarly help our students think rhetorically about speaking—the topic, purpose, and audience.¹⁷ However, as recent

¹⁵ As Vanessa Sasson suggests, “we may want to take time to show students how to climb in and try to take on an idea and take it seriously instead of just standing over it” (Sasson n.d.).

¹⁶ Joseph Bizup advocates this BEAM approach to sources instead of the standard distinction between primary, secondary, and tertiary sources: Background for materials a writer relies on for general information or facts; Exhibit for materials a writer analyzes or interprets; Argument for materials whose claims a writer engages; and Methods for materials for which a writer takes a governing concept or derives a manner of working (Bizup 2008).

¹⁷ The National Communication Association identifies these factors as key in oral communication: that they compose and deliver messages using delivery methods and interpersonal skills suitable to the topic, purpose, context and audience (Morreale et al. 1998).

research shows, the expectations and norms association with public presentations are shifting because of our exposure to digital media, leading to a preference for engaging stories that incorporate multimedia images and personally connect with the audience, which is exemplified in TED talks (Kedrowicz and Taylor 2016). This has led some to rethink presentation pedagogy in several ways: because digital delivery includes both face-to-face and virtual audiences, speakers must create engaging narratives that connect with a diverse or lay audience, and effective delivery includes successful interplay between the narrative, visuals, and vocal and physical techniques (Ibid., p. 369). As April Kedrowicz and Julie Taylor note, “Delivery, then, is becoming less about vocal and physical polish and rehearsal and more about characteristics of electronic eloquence, including enthusiasm, passion, and connection” (Ibid., p. 370). They recommend that we teach students to think about presentations as stories, and discuss the interplay between storytelling, visuals, and interpersonal connection. I have found Garr Reynolds’ *Presentation Zen* effective in teaching my students the importance of focusing on the topic, key messages, and audience in their design, incorporating illuminating and engaging stories, sharing the patterns and big pictures, attending and adjusting to nonverbal cues of the audience, bringing in humor when appropriate, and focusing on meaning (Reynolds 2012, pp. 16–19). It also includes practical suggestions for improving Powerpoint presentations, such as making slides that reinforce your words rather than repeat them, and “No more than six words on a slide. EVER. There is no presentation so complex that this rule needs to be broken” (Reynolds 2012, p. 20). By attending to these new digital discursive practices, we better prepare our students for postgraduate presentations that might include investor pitches, corporate keynotes, or TED talks, which tend towards short formats, multimodal delivery, and often a “leveling out” between speaker and audience with the removal of speaker podiums (Rossette-Crake 2020, pp. 574–75).

As public speaking can induce fear and anxiety in some students, we can scaffold their development of speaking skills throughout the semester by incorporating student-led small groups or student-led seminars, which can build their confidence in public speaking (Cornwall 2018, p. 113), and giving them feedback on their strengths rather than solely pointing out deficiencies.¹⁸ We can assess their formal presentations using the “Oral Communication VALUE Rubric”—that focuses on the importance of having a clear, compelling central message, good delivery (posture, gestures, eye contact, and use of voice), vivid, imaginative, and expressive language, effective organization, and credible supporting evidence (AACU 2009c)¹⁹—adapted to include their use of storytelling and visual materials.

Class discussions allow students to hone their informal speaking and listening skills, which are arguably more important in their postgraduate lives in the workplace and world. However, to ensure that students come prepared to participate, scholars suggest holding students accountable with a summary of key points, an outline, or questions from the assigned reading that is either graded or factored into their participation grade (Herman and Nilson 2018, p. 12). They also recommend explaining the purpose of discussion—for example, considering various possible interpretations of a text and offering evidence in support—and connecting it with workplace realities they will face after graduation, where they will need to discuss and debate strategies and problems in a civil manner (Ibid.). We can invite our students to generate group agreements where they establish ground rules—such as listening actively and attentively, not interrupting one another, criticizing ideas instead of people, avoiding put downs, and not monopolizing discussion—that create an environment of inclusivity, accountability, and active listening.

¹⁸ The focus on strengths instead of deficits draws from the Appreciative Inquiry model that consists of five steps: define (desired outcome), discovery (of strengths), dream (of future), design (action needed to make it happen), and deploy (taking that action). See “5-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry” *AI Commons*. Available online: <https://appreciativeinquiry.champlain.edu/learn/appreciative-inquiry-introduction/5-d-cycle-appreciative-inquiry/> (accessed on 28 February 2021).

¹⁹ Another resource for evaluating public speaking is *The Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form* (Morreale et al. 2007), which includes a description of the competencies and criteria alongside the evaluation form.

Listening has not garnered much attention as other communication skills, but some appreciate the need to make listening and empathy primary in our teaching (Brown 2008; Sullivan 2014). Patrick Sullivan describes listening as “an open, collaborative, dialogical engagement with others” (Sullivan 2014, p. 60), and he engages students in collaborative, dialogic and reflective work. Listening competencies include attending with an open mind, discriminating between facts and opinions, detecting bias and privilege, recognizing discrepancies between the speaker’s verbal and nonverbal messages, and employing active listening techniques including paraphrasing the speaker’s message or forming questions that clarify or qualify their content or intent.²⁰ To motivate students to engage in active listening, you can periodically ask, “What are you hearing?” that cues students to repeat or rephrase what others have said (Brookfield and Preskill 2016, p. 128), or practice “understanding checks,” where when anyone calls out “check for understanding,” the next to speak summarizes the previous speaker’s main point and offers a synthesis of the discussion before adding something new (Ibid., p. 132). You can also ask students to summarize small group discussions or have them write a “one-minute paper” about the things they learned from the discussion and any outstanding confusions (Herman and Nilson 2018, p. 17).

We could engage in Reflective Structured Dialogue in our class, which encourages people to speak and listen across difference by setting up reflection, structure, and dialogue as key conditions so they can “speak to be understood and listen to understand” rather than debate or attack (DeTemple et al. 2019, p. 226).²¹ Opening with a question tied to students’ own experience, students reflect silently for a short period, then go around in a circle speaking and listening for two minutes each. After the first round of two-minute storytelling, the second prompt goes deeper into the values underlying their story (“What values are important to you as you consider this issue?”), and the third prompt asks where they feel conflicted about it, or pulled in different directions. As Jill DeTemple remarks, “It coaxes people to a place of complexity. It doesn’t have to be a polarizing topic” (Ibid., p. 227). Because the structured dialogue models deep listening and reflection, it creates a culture of dialogue and curiosity in the classroom (Ibid., p. 228). At the end, she has students comment about one thing they are leaving behind and one thing they are taking with them (Ibid., p. 229).

5.4. Empathy

Scholars use a constellation of terms—sympathetic understanding, empathetic understanding, critical empathy—to describe the capacity to take the perspective of another person, imagine how one would think or feel in their place, and consider the world from their viewpoint, which social psychologists consider a primary component of empathy. Many teachers in Buddhist Studies identify it as one of their learning goals (Garrett 2018; Tsai 2008; Williams 2008; Reynolds 2001; Sarbacker 2005). Duncan R. Williams describes it as “coming to see the world through the eyes of a Buddhist (whether as depicted in canonical literature, art work, or in field interviews) without necessarily subscribing to that worldview” (Williams 2008, p. 160). He discusses an activity where students imagine a debate between Nichiren and Shinran on the role of faith in the path to salvation, pick a “team” that will argue for the superiority of their position, and then argue the other side. He notes how the exercise encourages students to “sympathetically understand” how the world might look to medieval Japanese Buddhists, and students who may be adherents of Jōdo Shinshū or Nichiren Buddhism are “invited to see the world from another vantage point.” (Ibid, p. 160).

Frances Garrett similarly engages the imagination of her students, but over the course of an entire year, by assigning them characters (scholars, ritualists, doctors, farmers,

²⁰ For an expansive list of competencies, see (Morreale et al. 1998).

²¹ DeTemple recommends waiting several weeks before engaging in Reflective Structured Dialogue; in the first weeks she has students complete an application called Open Mind by Heterodox Academy (<https://heterodoxacademy.org/>, accessed on 28 February 2021) about being open to ideas that run counter to their own, and they also craft a communication agreement for the course (DeTemple et al. 2019, pp. 229–30).

traders, or craftspeople) living together in a Buddhist village somewhere in the Himalayas (Garrett 2018). Designed in response to Todd Lewis' call for students to connect to lives of real Buddhists, especially their stories and rituals (Lewis 2002), Garrett employs sensory, embodied, and engaged forms of learning to enable her students to see the interconnection of ritual, education, medicine, art, politics, the environment, and contemplation in Buddhist communities. She writes, "By interacting with these events directly as members of (imagined) Buddhist communities, students were physically and emotionally deeply engaged in constructing religious meaning and religious work, and therefore they were understanding religion in a deeply felt way" (Garrett 2018, p. 343). Role-play is particularly suited to enable students to gain empathy for the lived religious experience of Buddhists, as it engages them emotionally, cognitively, and somatically.²²

Other instructors ask students to imagine themselves as a particular person in the Buddha's time—for example, as an Indian woman who has been approached by a Buddhist nun inviting her to join the Order—and explain how they would respond. Jan Willis prompts her students to: "(1) portray and comment on a given woman's social situation, (2) deftly summarize the Buddha's main teaching, and (3) react to the Teaching's attractiveness—or unattractiveness—given the circumstances you have initially posited" (Willis 2017, p. 155). Joanna Wotypka has her students pick a contemporary person who might be the future Buddha, and tell their story based on the model of the life of Gautama Buddha (Wotypka 2002, p. 97). In these ways, we can also ask our students to imagine themselves as living in the time of the Buddha, or have them imagine what it would be like to have a Buddha living in today's world, to cultivate their empathy for Buddhists and their worldviews.

5.5. Critical Thinking

Although recent scholarship argues that critical thinking is specific to each field and differs according to discipline (Middendorf and Shopkow 2018, p. 2), others have outlined the basic process of critical thinking and identified ways to improve critical thinking (Paul and Elder 2014; Brookfield 2011). Critical thinking involves identifying the assumptions that frame our thinking, determining the degree to which these assumptions are accurate and valid, looking at our ideas and decisions from several different perspectives, and on the basis of all of this, taking informed actions (Brookfield 2011). As Stephen Brookfield notes, the most difficult assumptions to identify and question are those embedded in dominant ideologies such as democracy, capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heterosexism (Ibid.). For that reason, critical and decolonizing pedagogies are particularly well suited for engaging our students in critical thinking, as they center the perspectives and experiences of marginalized groups (Avalos n.d.). As Matthew King notes, "Learning to think critically about difference and to denaturalize the way we are in place and time and embodiment is not just an exercise of the mind. That is the most political needed exercise that any of us can go through. There is an otherwise to how we are in the world and what seems natural and unmovable." (King n.d.). He has his students consider what categories might be more useful for thinking about Buddhism than the framework of World Religions.

We can assess critical thinking skills using the rubric of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, which was designed to be transdisciplinary (AACU 2009a). It focuses on clear explanation of issues, comprehensive analysis and synthesis of information, thorough analysis of one's own and others' assumptions, an imaginative, complex articulation of one's position and its limitations, and an exploration of its implications and consequences.

Teaching Buddhist Bioethics offers an example where one can develop students' critical thinking skills. Damien Keown recommends interactive case studies where students can dramatize scenarios through role-playing, as "it is through engaged participation that students best grasp the meanings and implications of ethical choices" (Keown 2017,

²² As Peter Elbow writes, "Sometimes you can't understand something till you try it or act on it. This is where role-playing gets its power: understanding through doing and inhabiting—not debating." (Elbow 2008, p. 8).

p. 298). He further suggests gathering scenarios from unfamiliar contexts that highlight distinctively Buddhist perspectives, so students can see how cultural norms influence the way debates are framed and proceed, and to contrast Buddhist and Western perspectives to make clear their respective cultural presuppositions (Ibid., p. 312).

5.6. Attention and Contemplation

Contemplative practices of stillness, silence, mindfulness, attention, awareness, reflection and self-inquiry can have a lifelong impact on our students (Grace 2011). The field of contemplative pedagogy is robust (Barbezat and Bush 2014; Simmer-Brown and Grace 2011), with recent scholarship focusing on relationality and intersubjectivity (Gunnlaugson et al. 2014, 2017, 2019) and demonstrating how mindfulness can support anti-racism and other anti-oppression pedagogies that invite students to examine how systems of oppression affect them and consider their roles within such systems (Magee 2019; Berila 2016). Contemplative pedagogies can build attention, deepen introspection, strengthen connection, and facilitate inquiry (Barbezat and Bush 2014; Barbezat 2014). We can develop our students' capacity for sustained attention as well as open receptivity, which Arthur Zajonc likens to the movement between stages of mental preparation, where one confronts a paradox or contradiction underlying a problem in a sustained way, and incubation, where one moves between engaging and disengaging from that paradox, until a flash of insight appears (Zajonc 2014, pp. 24–25).²³ Harold Roth designs his “meditation labs” so that students develop concentrative techniques before receptive ones as they progress through classical Daoist, Indic Buddhist, Zen, and Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction techniques (Roth 2014, p. 110).

Contemplative practices can encourage students to engage in slow, purposeful, deep learning and combat their tendency towards “continuous partial attention”—paying simultaneous attention to numerous sources of information, but at a superficial level. As Laurie Patton observes, “contemplative approaches move away from the kind of distracted and hasty instrumentality in which our students engage (what Paul Griffiths has called “reading for use”) and back toward a sense that study and sustained attention are worthy acts for members of an academic community.” (Patton 2011, p. 42). Harold Roth notes how contemplative techniques can be useful for self-exploration and self-understanding: “If the purpose of a university education is “to know thyself,” there is no better means to do so than through contemplative training.” (Roth 2011, p. 34).

Contemplative practices can encourage self-introspection that leads to transformation, but it also runs the risk of disturbing and harming certain students. As a result, scholars recommend taking safety precautions: (1) telling our students that all contemplations are voluntary, and allowing them to do free-writing or other reflection if they prefer, (2) instructing them to stop doing the contemplation if they experience overwhelming discomfort or agitation, (3) limiting the length of contemplation to no more than 15 or 20 minutes (Burack 2014, pp. 41–43). Brief moments of silence and contemplation have proven effective at preparing students for producing knowledge and making meaning in the classroom (Owen-Smith 2018, p. 111). As Sid Brown notes, “Teachers need not try to keep students' attentions as though it were a hostage. They are simply obliged to help them call their attention back again and again.” (Brown 2008, p. 16). She recognizes the lifelong value of students being able to cultivate curiosity and wonder, which can lead them to develop a thirst for learning (Brown 2008, pp. 102, 111).

Many teachers in Buddhist Studies incorporate contemplative learning into their classes (e.g., Jackson 2017, pp. 38–40; Thurman 2011; Simmer-Brown 2011a, 2011b; Brown 2008, 2011; Fort 2011; Klein and Gleig 2011; Tsai 2008). Some include even more sustained contemplative learning experiences, such as the Monastic Project (Mercer 2021; Oldstone-Moore 2009), designed for students to “experientially and empathetically” explore the

²³ I have also found that many breakthroughs about my research come when I am swimming or running, and my mind has the space to allow for such open awareness.

monastic path, including its contemplative and ascetic disciplines (Mercer 2021). Jennifer Oldstone-Moore offers it as one of the options for a required research project, and finds that students understand the commitment and effort required of a contemplative life and an appreciation for the way community supports and enhances religious practices (Oldstone-Moore 2009, p. 113). She has also led sustained experiential learning abroad at the Japanese pilgrimage circuit the Eighty-eight Sacred Places of Shikoku, where they experience moving through space and time, encountering people, and personal difficulties characteristic of pilgrimage (Oldstone-Moore 2009, p. 117). Justin McDaniel's course, "Living Deliberately," has students spend the entire semester living like monks, including undertaking a month-long vow of silence, restrictions on food, technology, and dress, waking up at 5 a.m. every day, and engaging in meditative exercises. Students are expected to journal every half-hour when awake, and practice an act of kindness each day (Supiano 2017). He maintains the value of an immersive approach to learning about monastic life, saying, "Monastic life is not about individual techniques. It's about fundamentally changing the way you interact with others, and interact with the environment, and interact with the way you survive through food, and sexuality, and shelter" (Supiano 2017).

In the context of a Buddhist Studies course, contemplative practices have the potential to blur boundaries between the academic study and the practice of Buddhism. In most institutional contexts, it would be important to ensure they are clearly secular and explicitly framed as experiential activities rather than religious meditation practices.²⁴ The boundaries become ambiguous when one uses contemplative learning to "elucidate the nature of non-dual reality" (Park 2002, p. 61) and goes so far as to suggest, "teaching and learning Buddhism, if it is not filtered by meditation, is not worthy of attention" (Park 2002, p. 39). Moreover, in a Buddhist Studies course, having students engage in meditation can further solidify misconceptions about the primacy of meditation. As Stuart Sarbacker notes, "the attention to experiential aspects of Buddhist practice can dangerously obscure the reality that Buddhist practice is often predominantly devotional and ritualistic rather than meditative, an issue that I believe is of critical importance" (Sarbacker 2005, p. 270).

6. Conclusions

This article has extensively reviewed the literature on teaching in Buddhist Studies and focused on the big ideas and transferrable skills that can serve as learning goal(s) for our undergraduate courses in Buddhist Studies. It identified several big ideas in Buddhist Studies: There is no single way to approach the study of Buddhism, "Buddhism" and "Buddhist" are constructed and contested categories, Buddhism is a lived religion embedded in cultural, social, and political contexts, Buddhism is diverse, dynamic, and historically conditioned, and the academic study of Buddhism is different from the practice of Buddhism. It also discussed transferrable skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening, empathy, critical thinking, and attention and contemplation. For each big idea and transferrable skill, it considered possible ways to assess and facilitate such learning.

I reviewed the field of Buddhist Pedagogy in the hopes that it gives a sense of where we have been, and I invite you to determine where we should go by engaging in the scholarship on teaching and learning (SoTL). As a historian of Chinese Buddhism, venturing into the field of SoTL felt like unfamiliar, uncharted territory. I had never conducted research on human subjects that was subject to approval by an Institutional Review Board (IRB), but I quickly learned that IRB approval is necessary if you want to use a course assignment or student work as data for public scholarship. Fortunately, Cathy Bishop-Clark and Dietz-Uhler's (2012) *Engaging in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* offered a step-by-step guide through the SoTL research process, and Kathleen McKinney's (2007) *Enhancing Learning through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* outlined the IRB process (pp. 59–65) and explained various SoTL methodologies including course portfolios, interviews and

²⁴ Judith Simmer-Brown articulates this stance well: "We are not introducing religious practices; we are developing new teaching pedagogies." (Simmer-Brown 2011a, p. 110).

focus groups, observational research, questionnaires, content analysis, secondary analysis, experiments, case studies, and multimethod studies (pp. 67–82).

I share these resources to encourage you to consider developing a research question tied to scholarship on teaching and learning in Buddhist Studies, applying for IRB approval, and eventually publishing your own work to contribute to the burgeoning field of Buddhist pedagogy. Future avenues of research about Buddhist pedagogy include how we might teach Buddhism at the graduate level, outside the United States, or as part of study abroad (Bruntz 2020, p. 198), and how we might decolonize the teaching and learning of Buddhist Studies.²⁵

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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²⁵ Natalie Avalos (n.d.) and Matt King (n.d.) emphasize the importance of decolonizing our teaching of Buddhist Studies in their podcasts, and the group Women in the Study of Asian Religions has taken steps towards such decolonizing efforts through their collaborative database of resources relevant to the teaching and study of Asian Religions that were either created by women or concerned with women (or both). See "WISAR Online Resources: Collaborative Database". Available online: <http://libblogs.luc.edu/wisar/resources/online-resources/> (accessed on 26 February 2021).

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