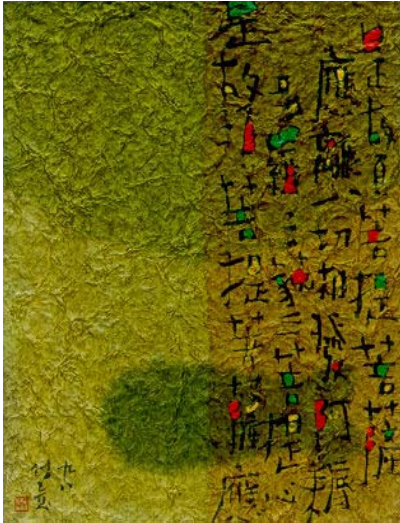


Research Article

Journal of Global Buddhism 9 (2008): 155 - 163



At Ease in Between:
The Middle Position of a Scholar-Practitioner

Duncan Ryūken Williams
UC Berkeley

Copyright Notes: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no charge is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format with the exception of a single copy for private study requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to:

<http://www.globalbuddhism.org>

Research Article

At Ease in Between: The Middle Position of a Scholar-Practitioner

Duncan Ryūken Williams

UC Berkeley

Abstract

This essay explores the recent state of the field of Buddhist Studies in the United States and how scholar-practitioners of Buddhism might position themselves within these institutional contexts. I propose that Buddhist scholar-practitioners have two major responsibilities vis-à-vis our students: 1) encourage students to “sympathetically understand” the tradition and 2) develop some critical perspective on a tradition with its lengthy history, multiplicity of sectarian forms, and great diversity of ways in which the religion has had and continues to have impact on culture, art, politics, and so forth.

Buddhist studies in the West is in a critical moment in its development as it shifts from older models of philologically-based studies of the Oriental “other” to one that recognizes the wide range of subjects and methods involved in the robust study of Buddhism, a religious tradition that is no longer necessarily the faith of an “other.” This is especially the case at institutions like mine (the University of California,

Berkeley), where the Asian/Asian-American student population is over 40 per cent and many California-born students of non-Asian heritage also come from Buddhist families.(1)

Buddhist studies in Asia is also at an interesting juncture. In Japan, for instance, scholars are debating new approaches to the study of Buddhism that avoid the limitations of the older models borrowed from Europe that fail to understand how Buddhism is a “lived religion” as well as those of Japanese sectarian studies that serve as nothing more than apologetics.

In this essay, I will explore the theme—“Buddhists and Scholars of Buddhism: Blurred Distinctions in Contemporary Buddhist Studies”—set by the *Journal of Global Buddhism*, by briefly taking stock of the field in the United States followed by some remarks on how those of us who are Buddhists at colleges and universities might begin a conversation on our position within academia.

Buddhist Studies in 2008

While many subfields in the study of religion undergo the normal peaks and valleys of the job market or even trend toward steady contraction, subfields like Buddhist studies (and for different reasons, Islamic studies) have been on a steady expansion in the past decade. Those of us who are Buddhists working in the Buddhist studies field in the West have appointments in a wide range of institutional contexts

(public and private universities, theological colleges, both Buddhist and otherwise) and academic programs (Asian studies and Buddhist/religious studies most commonly, but at times in other “disciplines” like history, sociology, anthropology, art history, and literature). Overall, these openings are increasing primarily because the majority of the larger research universities have committed to replacing retirements and often increasing Buddhist studies faculty and the mid-sized state universities and smaller liberal arts colleges with religious studies programs also seem to have committed to hiring at least one faculty member in the Asian religions field (most often filled by recent Ph.D.s who specialize in Buddhism). To a much lesser extent, the growth at Buddhist-run universities and colleges in the past decade at such institutions as the University of the West (Chinese), Naropa Institute (Tibetan), Soka University of America and the Center for Jodo Shinshuu Studies/Institute of Buddhist Studies (Japanese) have also opened up some possibilities.

There are many factors that would account for this trend, but it is worth pointing out that two major factors are the numerical growth in the North American Buddhist population combined with the heightened attention given to Buddhist thought and practice (if not actual conversion) in media and popular culture. Unlike the rise in Islamic studies at North American universities, that often seem couched in terms of national security concerns or backgrounded in terms of learning about a feared and demonized “other,” the public discourse on

Buddhism, more often than not, is focused on beautiful art pieces, peaceful meditative techniques, or iconic figures like the Dalai Lama. In the U.S., where Buddhists as a percentage of the population are a tiny minority, this perception of the tradition as a generally non-threatening and even a positive religion has framed the backdrop to the willingness at the departmental and senior administration levels to support the study of Buddhism and be open to increasing active giving by Buddhist individuals and foundations to support new faculty positions. Undergraduate courses in the study of Buddhism are often heavily oversubscribed and introductory courses can be filled with students in the hundreds eager to learn about Buddhist philosophy, culture, history, art, and practice and it is a part of our jobs to deepen whatever (sometimes rather impressionistic and basic) understanding they may have of the tradition.

Graduate education in Buddhist studies is equally vital in 2008 with Ph.D. programs in Buddhist studies (to be distinguished from tracks within Asian or religious studies programs) at institutions such as UC Berkeley, the University of Wisconsin, and the University of Michigan and major Buddhist studies research centers at Columbia University, UC Berkeley, UCLA, and Stanford University. Major universities without formal Buddhist studies centers or Ph.D. programs such as Harvard University, Princeton University, and the University of Virginia, also have dynamic programs with large graduate student cohorts, who go on to occupy the numerous openings nationwide.

“Don’t Stick to Either Side”: The Middle Position of a
Scholar-Practitioner

Given that the growth of Buddhist studies in the academy mirrors the increasing acceptance of Buddhism and Buddhists in America, it is not surprising to find that both students and scholars in the classroom find themselves exploring their own tradition rather than a strange and alien religion of an “other.” Most teachers of introductory courses on Buddhism will inevitably have a great diversity in the type of student interested in enrolling in such a class, but certain types in the 17-21 year-old demographic do stand out: a student who has grown up practicing Buddhism at a meditation center or have parents who have, an Asian American student who wants to learn about his/her heritage asking questions such as why their grandmother offers incense at Buddhist altars, or a student trying to figure out his/her life and seeking answers in the *Dharma*.

It is important to recognize the background and composition of our student body to adjust, where possible, so that we can address their deepest concerns. At the same time, I believe that whatever the composition of the classroom, Buddhist scholar-practitioners have two major responsibilities vis-à-vis our students: 1) encourage students to “sympathetically understand” the tradition and 2) develop some critical perspective on a tradition with its lengthy history, multiplicity of sectarian forms, and great diversity of ways in which the religion has

had and continues to have an impact on culture, art, politics, and so forth.

What I mean by “sympathetically understand” the tradition is the process of 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. Buddhist scholar-practitioners should not be in the business of preaching or advocating (this is a role we can play at the temple, if we so choose). Rather, we can invite students to enter into the world of a text, an image, or an oral narrative so that whether they are Buddhists or not, by the end of the term, they will have a much deeper understanding of how the world looks to a medieval Tibetan monk or a contemporary lay practitioner in San Francisco.

We can model this for them by setting up class exercises such as the following: 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 one position over the other; after ten minutes of debate, argue the other side. This kind of exercise encourages both Buddhist and non-Buddhist students to “sympathetically understand” how the world might look to medieval Japanese Buddhists. While there may be students who are adherents of Jōdo Shinshū or Nichiren Buddhism, they too are invited to see the world from another vantage point. It does not seem appropriate for a Buddhist scholar-practitioner to advocate or compel students to adopt Buddhist worldviews simply

because the teacher holds that perspective. It would be just as problematic if a Christian professor of Christianity tried to convert or persuade students to adopt a Christian point of view. What “sympathetically understanding” allows us to do is forge a middle path between advocacy and “objective” reporting on the tradition. It is not as if we can divorce ourselves from our faith tradition and it would impoverish the classroom if we could not share knowledge we have about particular temples or monks in an attempt to remain “objective.” This position discourages us both from hiding or “covering” who we are and from trying to advocate Buddhism.

As a teenager in Japan, one of the first conversations I had with my future Sôtô Zen teacher focused on “not sticking to either side.” Since my Japanese mother came from a Buddhist background and my British father a Christian one, noticing that I was struggling with identity formation, my teacher recommended that I not “stick” to thinking of myself as British or Japanese, Christian or Buddhist, or any of these conventional identities and find freedom in being able to freely move between any position.

By the time I had ordained as a Zen priest in my early 20s, my teacher’s own lifestyle of serving as abbot of a major Sôtô Zen temple for half the week and being a professor at a university in Tokyo for the other half, served as a model for me to learn about appropriate behavior (and identity) depending on the circumstance and finding freedom in so doing.

The ability to develop critical perspectives on Buddhism also comes from an understanding that the identity of Buddhism is also not fixed. Not only might we want to introduce students to the great transformations of the tradition over time, I often like to repeat a mantra of my graduate school mentor, Professor Masatoshi Nagatomi, “Buddhism is not monolithic.” When we acknowledge historical contexts and the development or the diversity of legitimately Buddhist perspectives, we gain some critical distance from what we might learn or even teach in a temple context. Rather than see this as an assault on our faith, this position affords us the ability to recognize how different Buddhists (including *Sanghas* not our own in the neighborhood) approach, discuss, and practice towards the alleviation of suffering. If we are ordained clerics or devout lay adherents of Buddhism, we will naturally wish for others to come into knowledge of the *Dharma* (just as we can imagine how a fervent Christian might wish to spread the good news about Christ to all he/she meets). But, the critical distance orientation of the academy helps us too much to easily give in to the temptation of proselytization in the classroom.

Ultimately, to feel at ease in that middle position allows us to recognize that the “insider/outsider” problem is nuanced in different ways by the institutional (and even geographic) contexts of our university work. While there are some who insist that only Buddhists can truly advance the understanding of Buddhism (or conversely, that the proper

academic study of Buddhism must be suspicious of Buddhist practitioners), I believe many in the field today would acknowledge that these positions are not particularly useful or accurate. Indeed, I am sure that I am not the first to notice that there are brilliant teachers and researchers of Buddhism who are non-Buddhists (as well as those who are Buddhist adherents) and that there are highly mediocre teachers and researchers of Buddhism who are nevertheless devout Buddhists (and one must also add, that the same mediocrity exists among atheist, agnostic, Christian, and Jewish professors of Buddhist studies). Our challenge today is to neither deny one's faith nor the realities of working within institutional cultures in a society where Buddhism is still a clear minority tradition.

(1) A 2007 official university study of undergraduate student religious affiliation (UC Undergraduate Experience Survey) found that over twenty faith traditions were represented at UC Berkeley with no tradition claiming a plurality. Buddhist students made up 7 per cent of the students (as a comparison, Catholics made up 14 per cent). See http://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2008/01/25_ucues4.shtml.