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Buddhists and Scholars of Buddhism:

Blurred Distinctions in Contemporary Buddhist Studies

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Introduction

Buddhists and Scholars of Buddhism: Blurred Distinctions in Contemporary Buddhist Studies

Buddhist Studies in the West is changing. It is well known that ‘Buddhist’ and ‘scholar of Buddhism’ are not always exclusive categories. As Buddhist Studies scholars wrestle with the identity of their field, as well as their own identities, they shape knowledge of Buddhism and may even contribute to shaping Buddhism itself in the West as well as in Asia.

This special issue of the *Journal of Global Buddhism* aims to tackle such current and pressing questions of blurred boundaries and genres: What is the place of advocacy or ‘theology’ in Buddhist Studies? Where is it implicit in contemporary scholarship? Should the study of Buddhism remain ‘distanced’ and ‘non-aligned’? Is there a definite line demarcating the two modes of scholarship? How does this distinction apply in different cultural locations?

In this issue, Ian Reader, John Makransky, and Duncan Williams grapple with these questions. For Reader, the line separating the study of Buddhism and the scholar’s own practice must be clearly demarcated. Citing the historical separation between theology and religious studies in universities, and offering some personal examples, Reader argues that ‘no matter what one’s own faith might be, it should not be allowed to influence or shape one’s teaching and research, which should be based in an academic ideal of objectivity.’

By contrast, both Makransky and Williams see their religious adherence as assisting Buddhist communities,

and enhancing their teaching respectively. For Makransky, scholar-practitioners of Buddhism should function as a bridge between the academy and their Buddhist communities. Makransky argues for a new discipline called ‘Buddhist critical-constructive reflection’ or ‘Buddhist theology.’ According to him, this discipline has two aims. First it ‘explores how academic religious studies may newly inform Buddhist understanding of their own traditions, and thereby serve as a resource for Buddhist communities in their adaptations to the modern world. The second is to explore how Buddhist modes of understanding may help address pressing needs of modern societies and inform current issues.’

For Williams, although ‘Buddhists scholar-practitioners should not be in the business of preaching or advocating’, they should encourage students to “sympathetically understand” the tradition, [that is] ... to see the world through the eyes of a Buddhist.’ Williams argues that ‘sympathetic understanding allows us to forge a middle path between advocacy and “objective” reporting on the tradition.’

These papers are by no means the last word in this discussion. We, at the *Journal of Global Buddhism*, would like to invite academics to submit rejoinders so that we can continue the conversation.

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