



Research Article

“Perhaps I’m Not a Global Citizen but a Global Listener Now”: The Ethics of Study Abroad in Buddhist Spaces

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The study of global Buddhism through a study abroad encounter presents invaluable opportunities for teachers and students at liberal arts institutions to contemplate the conundrum of global citizenship, a standard aim of liberal education in North America. When studying abroad, students become viscerally aware of their own positionality, which is reflected back to them constantly as they move through the social and cultural landscapes of Buddhist Asia. This reflection leaves them eager to raise, to the level of critical thinking, what is quite literally an embodied experience of difference and privilege. The essay connects the field of Buddhist studies to a larger conversation in the field of global education, arguing that Buddhist studies travel courses must interrogate concepts of global citizenship, address the legacies of colonialism, and teach the principles of ethical travel, in addition to introducing students to the living traditions of global Buddhism.

Keywords: Buddhist Studies; global citizenship; Bodh Gaya; Lumbini; study abroad; inclusive pedagogy

THE study of global forms of Buddhism through a study abroad encounter presents invaluable opportunities for teachers and students at liberal arts institutions to contemplate the conundrum of global citizenship, a standard aim of liberal education in North America. In particular, the study of Asian forms of Buddhism inspires some students to pursue study abroad in places like Taiwan, Nepal, or Thailand. The global COVID-19 pandemic put a temporary stop to study abroad for American students (though not to global education at colleges and universities in the United States). This pause in travel was an opportunity for educators to recalibrate the aims and methods of developing students as global citizens and to question more sharply what part travel should play in global education going forward. The lessons we have learned about global mobility, the costs of ignorance, and the pernicious effects of racism during those strange times makes rethinking study abroad in global Buddhist spaces all the more pressing. Is crossing borders, with all of its risks, costs, and complexities, more valuable than the many intercultural experiences students can engage without leaving the country? Can faculty create short-term study abroad trips that may not require academic prerequisites or language training but are still significantly different from a global tourism experience? Given that most liberal arts institutions embrace global competency as a learning goal for their students, what does achieving such a thing actually entail within the context of study abroad? As a partial response to these questions, I offer a pedagogical reflection on what 66 of my students did or did not learn about global citizenship, privilege, and ethically-informed travel during short-term study trips to the Buddhist heartland in Northern India and Southern Nepal between 2017 and 2024.

In my experience travelling with students, they become viscerally aware of their own social and cultural positionality, which is reflected back to them constantly as they move through the social and cultural landscapes of South Asia. This reflection leaves them eager to raise, to the level of critical thinking, what



is quite literally an embodied experience of difference and privilege, and most of them are hungry for a curriculum and pedagogy that supports them in doing so. In a recent publication by the Association of International Educators (NAFSA) titled, “How International Education Can Help Advance Social Justice,” David Wick and Tasha Willis argue for teaching students on study abroad courses about structural inequity. They write:

We, as international educators, believe that our field has the potential for advancing social justice. At the same time, we challenge the notion that international education activities, including but not limited to global student mobility, automatically or inherently lead to critical self-reflection, intercultural competence, critical empathy, and the betterment of humanity—all of which we see as components of socially just international education. The fundamental change that we propose is to make social justice the purpose and goal of international education activities, instead of framing it as an ancillary benefit (Wick and Willis 2020).

I concur. Study abroad courses in the field of Buddhist studies can and should take as their goal not only increasing the religious literacy of students—important as this is—but also broader concerns regarding ethical travel such as how and why they spend money, consume water, generate waste, take pictures, or post about their trip on social media when they spend time in contested places like Bodh Gaya, India. Faculty leaders should help students interrogate what, if anything, it means for American students on study abroad courses to become “global citizens” given their privileged access to resources, mobility, and safety. In short, Buddhist studies abroad should explicitly address current and historical differences in power, not just cultural difference, in order to “help advance social justice.”

Here, I connect my own field of Buddhist studies to a larger conversation in the field of global education. While North American Buddhist studies scholars are increasingly alert to dynamics of race, racism, ethnocentrism, and other forms of structural inequality in their research and in their professional environments, Buddhist studies has not often entered into parallel conversations in the field of global education.¹ This is a curious absence, given the international focus of the work at both the undergraduate and professional levels, and the multiple examples of study abroad programs in Buddhist places.² In this article, I make what I hope will be a useful contribution to considering the intersection of Buddhist studies and global education by offering a short menu of pedagogical lessons learned in leading American college students on a short-term trip to the Buddhist heartland between 2017 and 2024.

Notes on Methodology

This essay is a record of experiments in reflective and critical pedagogies, in the tradition of bell hooks and Paulo Freire (Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, Yale University 2021; Rollins School of Public Health Teaching and Learning Core, Emory University). It is not a systematic study based on social scientific methods. My commentary is drawn from on-the-ground observations about students and notes made across four iterations of a study abroad trip that I, a Professor of Religious Studies at a small liberal arts college in the Southeast of the United States, designed and executed.³ I also draw on a large pool of student reflective writing, which is quoted with permission and anonymized. Other sources of data include outward-facing text and imagery produced by the global education and marketing departments of my institution. I situate

¹ A few examples of pedagogical reflections that do combine Buddhist Studies and international education perspectives include Mitchell (2015), Oldstone-Moore (2009).

² One of the most venerable of these is the Carleton-Antioch Buddhist Studies Program in Bodh Gaya India, started in 1979 by Robert Pryor and Tara Doyle. For an overview of the program at 40 years of age, see Rockefeller (2019).

³ The fourth iteration of the trip was designed and executed with assistance from a faculty co-leader who teaches in Biology.

my pedagogical reflections on teaching Buddhist studies abroad in the larger literature on global education, experiential learning, reflective service learning, and ethical travel.

Three Weeks in Nepal and India

Between January of 2017 and the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, I led three groups of undergraduate liberal arts students to India and Nepal for a short-term course to study the impact of religious tourism on the major Buddhist pilgrimage towns of Lumbini and Bodh Gaya. In January 2024 I led a fourth shortened and simplified trip to Kathmandu and Lumbini, with a somewhat modified focus. In total, I have shepherded 66 eighteen-to-twenty-two-year-old mostly (but not exclusively) white, mostly affluent students through challenging encounters with poverty, pollution, physical discomfort, and the culturally and religiously unfamiliar. A minority of the participating students were religious studies majors or minors. A few were studying relevant disciplines such as political science, international relations and global affairs, or anthropology. The majority were students of one my institutions' more popular disciplines: environmental studies, marine science, biology, psychology, or animal studies.

In its first three iterations, my course was titled, "Buddhism, Activism, Environment." The course description promised that "Students will learn about the complexities of environmentalism in religious South Asia, become sensitive observers of social environments different than their own, develop an understanding of the social and environmental impacts of transnational religious tourism, and consider the role that religion plays in nurturing intentional and agentive social change in communities with little political power or economic means, or in exploiting those same communities." The fourth iteration of my course was co-taught with a colleague in Biology and renamed "Plants and Pilgrimage." Its course description promised simply that students would "explore the intersection of Buddhist pilgrimage, Buddhist social engagement, Buddhist approaches to the natural world, and sustainable local agricultural practices." Both versions of the course included both a service-learning component and a field work component.

Students participating in the course embedded in local communities and connected to networks of local individuals involved in education and environmental conservation. In Lumbini, regarded as the site of the Buddha's birth, students worked with the Lumbini Social Service Foundation (LSSF),⁴ an organization headed by a Lumbini-born Theravāda monk called Metteyya Sakyaputta. The LSSF has as its chief mission the education of children and the empowerment of girls and women. LSSF is also connected, through Metteyya, to the Lumbini Crane Sanctuary, a conservation organization focused on preserving wetlands important to Sarus Cranes and other wildlife species. We also partnered with Girl Reports,⁵ a Florida-based non-profit that runs a journalism project in a LSSF-run English-medium girls' high school in Lumbini. In Bodh Gaya, my students partnered with environmental studies graduate students from nearby Nalanda University to investigate the environmental impact of the Mahābodhi Temple complex, a site venerated by Buddhists the world over as the place of the Buddha's enlightenment.

My students learned invaluable lessons about religion in general and Buddhism in particular. They learned that religion is important to know about because it saturates the daily lives of many who struggle to survive and thrive in this world. They also learned that Buddhism is a lived religion interpreted and inhabited differently by different Buddhists, that there is no essence we can call "Buddhism," that Buddhists and Hindus share many religious spaces and devotional feelings in South Asia, that Buddhists are just as likely to circumambulate or offer flowers as they are to meditate, that Buddhists are not inherently more environmental than other religious practitioners, and that Buddhists generate garbage just like anyone

⁴ See <http://servelumbini.org>. For an in-depth study of one LSSF project, the Peace Grove Institute, see Langenberg (2022).

⁵ <https://www.girlreports.org>

else, even, or especially, at their sacred sites. My experiences indicate that, without a doubt, study abroad programs to Buddhist places like Northern India and Nepal have the capacity to engender in students salient insights about Buddhism and religion. Study abroad students' realizations about the historical situatedness, the aesthetic dimensions, the embodied and gendered nature, and the dynamism of local Buddhisms are not very different from what I and many of my Buddhist and religious studies colleagues strive to impart in classroom settings.⁶ Immersed in religious environments and surrounded by religious people, however, students absorb these valuable perspectives quickly and deeply.



Figure 1: The January 2018 “Buddhism, Activism, Environment” cohort in Rajgir, India. Photo credit: Amit Srivastwa

Vital learning beyond of the course’s Buddhist studies curricular content occurred via reflective writing and structured group discussions about the immersive experiences students were having in local communities. Student reflections and discussions were framed by a set of readings that emphasized ethical travel and addressed inequity in a global context. For instance, prior to travel, students read and discussed Talya Zemach-Bersin’s argument about “why American students abroad can’t be ‘global citizens.’” In it, Zemach-Bersin, who studied in an immersion program in Nepal and Tibet, argues that students “cannot be expected to transcend historical, political, social, and global systems of power in order to become cross-culturally immersed ‘global citizens.’ We can, however, be asked to become internationally conscious and self-aware American citizens who are responsible for thinking about those critical issues” (Zemach-Bersin 2008). The students also wrestled with Tania Mitchell, David Donohue, and Courtney Young-Law’s work on the whiteness of service learning prior to departure. Mitchell and her co-authors note that most service learning takes place at predominately white institutions and often engages communities of color. Mitchell et al. “offer

⁶ For a comprehensive overview of the last twenty years of Buddhist Studies pedagogies, see McGuire (2021).

alternatives to service-learning practice that are not rooted in white supremacy, but instead allow for making whiteness visible and critiquing it” (T. D. Mitchell, Donohue, and Young-Law 2012: 613). Additionally, my classes ruminated on Natalie Gummer’s suggestion that we “under-stand” (as in, assume the humble position of learner) and hold a disposition of “profound unknowing” when encountering religious ways of knowing and being, rather than defaulting to an attitude of superior scientific knowledge that judges and assesses (Gummer 2005). Critical conversations about global citizenship, ethical travel, the baked-in racial dynamics of international service, and the benefits of suspending judgment when encountering cultural difference provided my students with a toolbox of critical concepts that proved useful during our time abroad. These readings also modeled an attitude of self-reflective questioning that mirrored and supported students’ own questioning mindsets as they travelled through the social, political and cultural landscapes of Northern India and Southern Nepal.

In confronting the realities of environmental degradation, limited access to education and employment opportunities, and entrenched gender hierarchies—not in the abstract, but in the lives of people they came to know, like, and respect—students realized the facts of their own positionality as relatively affluent American citizens. This realization occurred on the individual and collective level and was a productively destabilizing experience for students. Living, however briefly, without abundant hot water, indoor heating, good internet, wall sockets that work, or ready access to their usual creature comforts and familiar distractions also sent students on a pilgrimage into the self. Even while challenged in these ways by a sudden plunge into a very different world, students had eyes to see the exquisite and unique blessings of rural Nepal and urban North India: the clever mud architecture, the vast old palace of the Mahant at Bodh Gaya, the expert animal husbandry, the beautiful manners, children’s games so obviously enjoyed, food locally grown and delicious, time taken to offer kindness and conversation, and on and on. The list is endless. I could see that the world had become more complicated and more heartbreaking for my students during those three weeks.

The pedagogical reflections that follow address how a study abroad course in Nepal and India can enhance the curricular goal of competency in global forms of Buddhism by working directly with student bias, discomfort, culture shock, and a dawning awareness of colonial legacies of inequity as opportunities for growth. It is worth noting that, though unintentional, the pedagogies explored here parallel classically Buddhist theories of learning in that they seek to help students name, rather than avoid, difficult truths and meet alienation and experiences of suffering with an openness to learn.

Education, not Destination

As part of their general education requirements, students at my institution must demonstrate global competency by passing a course with a global perspective. My India/Nepal study abroad course carries a “G” or global perspective because it has been judged sufficient to teach students competency in at least two of five areas: cultural depth, intercultural proficiency, global citizenship, global interdependence, and experiential engagement with other cultures.⁷ While travelling may seem to be any easy and automatic way to gain global competency, many educators understand that simply getting on a plane is not enough. Some argue that it can even be mis-educative (Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich 2002; Zemach-Bersin 2008). To use the language of postcolonialism, when cultural competence is promoted in a superficial way, it easily becomes a defensive tactic for colonial (or neocolonial) power. The legacy of colonial dynamics of power are not usually obvious to the majority of my students at the outset, at least not as they apply in the context of travel. Rather, many embark on international education experiences, mine and others, innocent of this pernicious legacy, and armed mostly with a spirit of adventure.

⁷ Eckerd College’s learning outcomes for global competency are similar to those listed on the AACU’s Global Learning VALUE Rubric: <https://www.aacu.org/initiatives/value-initiative/value-rubrics>.

As Robin DiAngelo (2011), Tania Mitchell et al. (2012), Zeus Leonardo (quoted in T. D. Mitchell, Donohue, and Young-Law 2012) and others have argued, whiteness is appropriative. In other words, it assumes ready access to other cultural traditions from a position implicitly held to be neutral. One symptom of this culture of whiteness is the casual way in which many of my students typically undertake international travel. Though it may not seem like something that needs to be explicitly encouraged on a study abroad course, I find I must theorize the necessity of laying a foundation of relevant subject knowledge for my students. Not only do students benefit from *actually being well informed* about the particular geographical places they are visiting, including histories, recent politics, and cultural and social environments, they also benefit from *knowing that they are responsible for knowing things* as a foundation for ethical travel. This epistemological ethic must be intentionally taught because the institutional structures and student cultures of global education in North American colleges and universities tend to downplay the value of language or content expertise, and empower students to embark on study abroad courses with little or no foundational knowledge.

Talya Zemach-Bersin interviewed twenty-five Wesleyan University students who had returned from study abroad courses. Many of those she interviewed described picking their study abroad program out of a catalogue whimsically, or randomly, with little forethought, background knowledge, or preparation. Many confessed to reading one book or less about their study abroad destinations before departure. Many also described these pre-departure attitudes and behaviors with some embarrassment and confusion after the fact, feeling that they had “betrayed their own intelligence and ethical instincts while selecting programs and preparing to study abroad” (2009: 309). Zemach-Bersin’s interview data accords with evidence that, while American students are increasingly encouraged by international educators to visit “non-traditional places,” often in the developing world, there has been no corresponding increase in the academic study of those places’ languages, cultures, and histories among student populations at American institutions of higher education (Woolf 2006: 136–37).

An emphasis on being informed, and the introduction of a set of anti-colonial and anti-racist critical tools before travel, is especially needed for students at liberal arts colleges such as mine that market global education using strategies that emphasize choice, adventure, and the exotic.⁸ For instance, our global education page calls for students to “See the World,” “Choose from 300+ destinations,” and “Set off for parts unknown.”⁹ My institution’s printable brochure for the Global Education program features on its cover a grinning (white) student in sunglasses and red Asian-motif pajama-style pants riding a water buffalo, his hands raised in a gesture of exultation. He is riding behind, and towering above, the much smaller, much browner, serious-looking farmer who, presumably, owns the buffalo.¹⁰ Not only does this cover image proffer fun in “parts unknown” rather than connection, self-awareness, and learning, it can be read as a racialized text, with its composition effectively dominated by the white student-traveler and the barefoot almost expressionless local man fading into the foreground.¹¹

As Talya Zemach-Bersin (2009) and others have documented, my institution is far from alone in marketing its study abroad trips using tropes that emphasize exotica and center (often white) students as adventuring subjects travelling through a foreign landscape rather than dialogical subjects engaged in intercultural learning.¹² Zemach-Bersin makes the argument that such marketing strategies “often promote highly

⁸ Like most other colleges and universities, my institution markets its international education opportunities to prospective students as a recruitment tool. It has been recognized in the international education community for its popular in-house short-term study abroad trips. See “Eckerd College No. 2 in the Nation for Short-term Study Abroad (Nov. 20, 2019), <https://www.eckerd.edu/news/blog/eckerd-short-term-study-abroad>. Accessed February 5, 2024.

⁹ <https://www.eckerd.edu/internationaled>. Accessed February 4, 2024.

¹⁰ “Study Abroad: ThinkOutside,” Eckerd College, 2021, accessed February 4, 2024.

¹¹ The marketing and communications department at my institution informed me that they intend to change the cover image when this brochure is next revised due to “sensitivities.” Personal communication, April 2, 2024. They requested that I credit the student photographer. To clarify, my present critique is directed at the institutional use of the image, not the taking of the photograph.



Figure 2: The cover of a printable brochure promoting Global Education. Photo credit: Daniel Chapman 2017.

problematic, insensitive, and disingenuous ideologies” that commodify and devalue study abroad destinations and the people that live there (2009: 309). She also argues that such strategies create a student culture that places *destination* before *education* and regards host countries primarily as sites for recreation and self-enhancement.

The student attitudes Zemach-Bersin describes were not infrequently reflected in my own students’ commentaries. One student described how, prior to travel, she had “the idea of this glamorous international trip” and mentioned shopping as the first in a list of activities she had imagined herself engaging in. She found the realities of the trip to be quite different than her pre-trip fantasies, and implied that the disconnect between imagined “glamour” and her actual experience in Nepal increased her discomfort in country. Another commented on how challenging it was to see friends’ social media posts about their peak travel experiences—climbing to the top of a mountain, cocktails on an exquisite Thai beach at sunset, scuba diving to a reef—on other study abroad courses, while experiencing cold temperatures, a lot of dust, and a lack of Starbucks in Lumbini.

Short-term winter travel courses offered through my institution’s Global Education office do not typically carry prerequisites.¹³ While faculty leaders may be able to impose prerequisites by only accepting students that are academically prepared, this approach works well only for very well-subscribed disciplines such as marine science, animal studies, and biology. The short-term format does not allow for extensive class time before or after departure, especially for travel destinations that are difficult to get to like India and Nepal. A minority of the students I have brought to India and Nepal have ever taken even a religious studies course, much less a course about Buddhism or South Asia. While quite a few expressed curiosity about

¹² See also Boulden (2022), Doerr (2012), Patel (2021), and Woolf (2006).

¹³ For a discussion of the pros and cons of short-term study abroad courses, see Chieffo and Griffiths (2009). For short-term courses as a “democratization” of study abroad, see Patel 2021. Many studies mention that short-term study abroad courses are more accessible to Black students. See for instance Almassri et. al. (2023).

Buddhism based on a high school religion course, contact with a Buddhist family member, or Buddhism's social media presence, the vast majority declined to enroll in a semester-long course prior to travel, citing the demanding requirements of their major(s). The dramatic disconnect between their academic backgrounds and their choice of my India/Nepal trip did not seem to trouble many of them before the trip. Resonant with Zemach-Bersin's findings, after the trip, a number of my students expressed regrets that they had not taken or would not take more religion courses due to the demands of their majors.

In an attempt to finesse a less-than-ideal pedagogical set up, I increased my in-country reading requirements after the first iteration of my trip. Most nights during travel, the students were expected to read an article about something related to the next day's activities. These readings formed the basis for journaling, on-the-fly class sessions, and informal discussion. This approach is supported by research in experiential education that shows that "experiences are not educative in and of themselves," but must be supported by synthesis, reflection, and critical analysis. In the absence of these educative supports, *experiences* can, in fact, be "mis-educative" (Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich 2002: 43-44).¹⁴

Most students were appreciative of, if sometimes stressed by, my course's reading requirement. In a post-trip reflection, one student wrote that "the assigned readings were really great to look through while on the trip. . . . the readings themselves made my understanding of what I was seeing so much stronger, and I wish every time I traveled I would have those resources available to me." Another commented that "the wonderful thing about traveling as a part of a class is that you get to have the trip planned, you get to go with people who have been before and you get the educational aspect before, during, and after. Having the classes before and the guides during might be the biggest benefit of going as a school trip. I feel so lucky to have been given the resources I needed to be a more educated traveler."

A few of my students resisted. One expressed dismay at how much she was expected to know about and think about Buddhism, a strange thing to object to given that the course clearly centered Buddhist pilgrimage and was co-taught by a religious studies professor. Another student insisted that having to read would get in the way of her authentic experience of India and Nepal. She recorded this sentiment in a pre-trip reflection:

I expect that the readings we encountered and [pre-trip] classroom experiences will have little impact on our experiences. I believe this because we are going to be in such a new environment that everything we knew before leaving will quickly disappear into a combination of excitement, anxiety, and wonder.

During the trip she flatly refused to engage course content in the manner required by the syllabus, stating in her journal that "I do not want to journal on the readings. I don't want to remember the experience through someone else's words. You can grade me however you want. I will still read them. But my entries are going to be based on my perception of my five senses." In a post-trip reflection about how the formal curricular content had enhanced her learning during the trip, she responded that "the assigned readings and classroom time had little affect [sic] on my experience. As soon as we arrived I felt that nothing I was experiencing I could have prepared for. The thing that prepared me was the openness I had to embracing that feeling."

This student's resistance to synthesizing experience and academic learning during the course of the trip may reflect, to some extent, the overwhelming nature of the experience and the seeming impossibility of making it relate to academic information. Kerry Mitchell describes this type of student experience as "a general unease over the unfamiliarity of the larger context and the practical experience of flux and surplus that constantly surpasses analytical skills," and suggests a response that affirms such student experiences as a sign that a

¹⁴ Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich's use of this term is borrowed from American philosopher and education reformer, John Dewey. See also Roholt and Fisher (2013: 48-65) and Doerr (2019).

deeper experience is taking place beyond the “analyzing, calculating, categorizing mind” (K. Mitchell 2015: 57).

My position falls somewhere short of Mitchell’s (and my student’s) almost mystical embrace of raw experience as a form of transformative knowledge. I argue that we should discourage students from disavowing any responsibility for learning about the particular history and culture of the place while radically centering their own subjective experiences. Responding to student anxiety is obviously important, but an approach that devalues in-depth historical and cultural explanation has the potential to feed the neoliberal student culture of consumption and self-enhancement Zemach-Bersin critiques.

Global Citizenship?

The definition of global citizenship given under the general education learning objectives at my institution is “posing critical questions about power relations and asymmetries across the globe and within individual countries, identifying ethical and moral questions from multiple standpoints within a given global issue, and determining how individual and collective interventions in global social problems might be both possible and consequential.”¹⁵ In the general education course required for all first-year students, a foundational reading is Martha Nussbaum’s 2007 essay, “Cultivating Humanity and World Citizenship.” In it, she describes three “abilities” that students of the liberal arts can develop in order to broaden their perspectives and moral commitments beyond the local or the national to the global. These three are, “the capacity for Socratic self-criticism and critical thought about one’s traditions;” “the ability to see oneself as a member of a heterogeneous nation and world;” and “the ability to sympathetically imagine the lives of people different than oneself” (Nussbaum 2007).

In post-trip writings, students made the following comments in response to a question about how the trip impacted their views of global (or world) citizenship:

While I don’t feel compelled to go and make people see things the way I do, I want to go and have others show me their side of things. For me it makes the world bigger, instead of smaller the way the cliché says it does. I went all the way to India and only saw a small slice of what else was there. Perhaps I’m not a global citizen but a global listener now.

And:

Some of my friends that traveled abroad made comments on how worldly they are becoming and how many countries they’ve been to, but I do not think that travel makes you a global citizen. After discussing my experiences and how I don’t think we are global citizens, one friend stated that she thinks our course was too cynical and it’s unfair to discredit our experiences with topics like white privilege. However, I don’t think being aware of our privilege and critiquing while reflecting discredits our trip. I think we just aren’t assuming supreme understanding and are aware of the existing knowledge and experiences that we do not have the capacity to obtain.

Another thoughtful student wrote in her trip journal:

Probably the most all-encompassing theme of this trip for me . . . [is] ethical self-awareness as an embodied, white American person abroad, especially in places like India and Nepal. . . . I am deeply fascinated and troubled by the colonial, imperialist history that my positionality carries and which my body cannot be separated from and which I found implications my body carried to the people who saw me . . .

¹⁵ From an internal Eckerd College document.

In fact, these student comments do pose “critical questions about power relations and asymmetries across the globe.” I believe that they are also an attempt at “determining how individual and collective interventions in global social problems might be both possible and consequential” in the way they reach towards an “ethical self-awareness.” All three of these student comments also demonstrate a deepened appreciation that global citizenship as defined by Nussbaum is a demanding, embodied practice that requires rigorous self-reflection and informed understanding of other people’s histories and cultures. At the same time, these students continue to hold in mind Zemach-Bersin’s critique of the facile ways in which global citizenship is understood, even by global education educators at times, as the automatic outcome of travel.

Reflection and Confrontation

Theories of experiential education emphasize the interplay of experience and conceptual learning in which events of the world are interpreted by means of key concepts, and conceptual schema are altered to better fit events of the world. Awareness episodes, sometimes called “critical incidents” in the literature, are a staple of experiential learning pedagogy. For my course, students were instructed to describe and reflect on an interesting event or exchange in which they had realized that they had something to learn or unlearn.¹⁶

Experiential education’s emphasis on individual critical reflection and the collective processing of events supports the goal of harnessing international education to support social justice in very direct ways. Without holding students accountable for doing the work of understanding themselves in relationship to the economic, religious, cultural, racial and gendered landscape of India and Nepal, students easily drift away from the educational space only to find themselves in the same old cramped space of privilege, however exotically Buddhist or South Asian its setting. Jennifer Oldstone-Moore describes this phenomenon with much sympathy and attunement to the student experience:

In foreign situations, students often have trouble experiencing their new environs because they are too busy finding solace in whatever they can hold on to of the familiar in order to hide their embarrassment at being literally out of place. Clumping together and desperately keeping the conversation trivial and observation mundane, they obsessively check their cell phones and strive to stay psychologically connected to home and the familiar instead of risking the discomfort of the foreign encounter (Oldstone-Moore 2009: 114–15).

Some of the places I visited with my students were adept at facilitating this behavior through their many shops eager to sell tourist swag and their many cafes offering chocolate cake and WiFi. Faculty can nudge students away from the safety of daily pizza excursions, busy intra-group socializing, and obsessive scrolling with structured schedules, verbal redirection, and other forms of engagement. Still, it must also be acknowledged that experiential education abroad is a messy human business. It involves the whole student (and the whole instructor), up to and including their (and sometimes our) resistance, reactivity, anxiety, and sadness.

During our time in country, I led frequent group reflections on the days’ events. These discussions were loosely structured, but I did start with a prompt or open-ended question based on the group’s recent activities. Sometimes discussions were initiated and led by a student, in keeping with the trauma-informed principle of supporting student agency. On the third iteration of the trip, a senior student and veteran of the trip accompanied the group. My idea was that she would be another set of eyes and ears in the group, and useful bridge between the students’ perspectives and my own as the faculty leader. She and I planned and led evening

¹⁶ Students were instructed to: a) identify the event; b) describe the relevant details; c) list the people involved and their relationship to themselves and others; d) describe their own involvement in and responses to the event; e) describe what new thing they thought they had learned from the episode or what old thing they had unlearned. See a description of pedagogy around “critical incidents” in Roholt and Fisher (2013); and a description of writing assignments based on “oh events” as described in Irvine (2015). Mitchell (2015) also explores the philosophy behind “critical incident” writing.

reflections together that year. A rule of group discussion was that, while discussion back and forth was not suppressed, everyone was required to speak before it was over. Students often called upon each other and showed interest in and concern for hearing each person's voice. They often elicited my own responses and answers as well.

While useful as a monitoring mechanism, and invaluable for student learning, reflective discussions are not always a failsafe pedagogy for the work of experiential education abroad. Liberal Arts students well-versed in student-centered pedagogies sometimes engage group reflections as performative exercises. In other words, they may do and say what they think I expect or their peers will accept, especially when the think what they are actually feeling or thinking about is too raw and unprocessed.¹⁷ This performance did not go unnoticed by some of my more perceptive students, who brought this pattern to my attention. The disengagement of some students, whether related to psychological stress, resistance to the rigor of the curriculum, or other reasons, is reflected in the comments of one student, who wrote with brutal frankness in her journal that "I am starting to understand everyone's intentions on this trip. Some just want cool experiences, some wanted a theology class, some bit off more than they could chew, and a small percent took the learning part seriously." Asking for and receiving consistent honest reflection, much less intellectual rigor, from students in the midst of a busy and demanding study abroad trip is difficult. Sometimes it happens, and sometimes it doesn't. On the other hand, teachable moments of great power abound during study abroad, if the teacher is quick enough (and not too exhausted) to seize them. The following is the tale of one such moment.

A group of four students, all women, were teamed with two Nalanda University Masters students, both men, for a day of fieldwork in Bodh Gaya, India. I had met both M.A. students during the previous year's fieldwork and regarded their graduate advisor as a trusted colleague. The American students took an immediate dislike to one of the local students, feeling that his behavior was high handed and misogynistic. The first issue arose when he and his colleague mapped out the day's fieldwork plan without sufficiently consulting the American group. The American women quickly circled the wagons, talking among themselves about their objections to this behavior, and interpreting many subsequent events within the context of their initial irritation. For instance, they disliked the fact that he paid the *thukthuk* driver, ordered on their behalf (in Hindi) at lunch, tried to serve the dishes around family style, and spoke in traditionally sexist terms about his future family life.

I am not necessarily defending the local M.A. student's attitudes or behaviors, some of which were almost certainly sexist. A female student from the same graduate program at Nalanda University reported having "unresolvable problems" with the male M.A. student in question because of his disrespect for women. He was not my student, however. My concern was not to challenge him, but rather my four outraged students, who swooped on me at the end of the day with the full expectation that I, whom they suspected of being a card-carrying feminist, would participate in their feminist ire and denounce this young man. (I also want to state that at no time did they report feeling unsafe. Had that been the case, my response would have been entirely different, of course.) My response to them was to point out:

1. That they owed him politeness since he had voluntarily devoted an entire free day to their fieldwork project, at least partly out of sense of obligation to foreign visitors in his country. Rudeness should have been out of the question, however irritated they may have felt.
2. The fact that, while his management of the fieldwork may not have been as inclusive of them as it ideally should have been, he also knew far more than they. More to the point, they were entirely dependent

¹⁷ See Irvine (2015) on the shame students feel when they experience destabilizing emotions during study abroad.

on his language competency (and those of the other local student). They would not have been able to conduct fieldwork interviews with Hindi-speakers without his help.

3. They misinterpreted a number of his actions, so hasty were they to denounce him as a bigot. Neither negotiation with a *thukthuk* driver to get a local price, nor helping them to place a restaurant order (very possibly because the waiter didn't understand their rapid colloquial American English), are inherently sexist actions.
4. They had failed to maintain an attitude of respectful curiosity and a "disposition of unknowing." They had resorted so quickly to judgement, believing their own frameworks to be so unquestionably correct and universal that they had missed an opportunity to learn more about the society they were encountering. For instance, it is normal in India to order and serve food family style in restaurants. Also, India is deeply hierarchical, not only with respect to gender but also with respect to age and status. As seniors both in age and in education, it was predictable that the two Nalanda students assumed a leadership role for the day's work.
5. To state the obvious, interactions between men and women run on a very different logic in a highly gender conservative context. This difference may not be justifiable from a justice standpoint, or easy to tolerate when boldly endorsed in conversation, but it is a logic that is worth learning about—"understanding," to use Gummer's terminology—as student travelers in a foreign land.¹⁸

When I pushed back against their shared outrage and questioned some of *their* interpretations, behaviors, and motivations instead of focusing on the Nalanda student's behaviors, feelings ran high. I felt it pedagogically necessary to challenge them, and was mortified to think they had treated our hosts rudely, but I was also acutely conscious that the focus of their anger had shifted to me. After the heat of the moment passed, however, one student, the ringleader of the four students, reflected on the incident as an "awareness episode," writing:

I was disappointed with myself for making a snap judgement that I could not get rid of. I carried that judgement with me even when trying to open up to him and engage in human conversation. I still had a feeling of uncomf[ort] [sic] and dislike. I hope that I can learn how to be stronger and more open minded from this experience.

This student's written reflection gave evidence for a widening of perspective. She was eventually able to shift the focus from her own feelings of injury to the implications of sexism for women living in gender-hierarchical environments like India. Referencing the female student who had "irresolvable differences" with the male student in question, my student wrote: "It made me feel at ease that an Indian woman was able to see his behavior as out of line but I feel terribly sad for her. I cannot image having to stand up for my gender in such a serious way all the time, especially in university!" I took these reflections as evidence that my decision to teach against the grain in that moment of high emotion had, in fact, resulted in growth, at least for that one student.

Emotion and Anxiety

Andrew Irvine writes compellingly about the role emotion plays in the learning of a study abroad student. What I have termed "awareness episodes," Irvine refers to as "oh events." These, he avers, are often prompted

¹⁸ As a scholar who specializes in gender and sexuality in contemporary Hinduism pointed out to me, "the power dynamics embedded in relations between Indian or Nepali men and women, the colonial history of South Asia, as well as the women's whiteness, add many layers of complexity to this exchange. Men often approach women, kin and non-kin, from an attitude of patriarchal protection. It may be patronizing, but culturally, it has been a context for 'protecting' the socially ascribed honor and 'good name' of women. In the colonial frame, white women needed to be protected from brown men. Perhaps from this grad student's eyes, he was protecting the women's honor by acting as their male protector, which accomplishes a kinship relationship with these foreign white women."

by a gap between what the student expects or “knows” to be the case, and what he or she actually experiences. For example, many of my students were deeply discomfited by the chaos of the Mahābodhi Temple complex, which, being the site of the Buddha’s enlightenment, they “knew” and believed *ought* to be a place of quiet contemplation. Irvine writes, “Oh events can be satisfying at times, but more often than not, they are charged with anxiety. It can be shameful enough not to be cool, calm, and collected in the moment. To have to recollect it that way, before an audience, is asking a lot of students in their late teens and early twenties” (Irvine 2015: 49). For Irvine’s students, the main audience seemed to have been Irvine himself as the reader of their “oh event” essays. For my students, the audience was often me, and at other times, the entire group.

While difficult for them to experience, and challenging for the faculty leader to manage skillfully, students’ reactivity—their shame, their outrage, their sadness, their anxiety—often signals not trauma but a change in perspective, a widening of the frame, or the dying of a cherished but unsupportable belief; in other words, learning.¹⁹ The alternative to experiencing tension, guilt, and anger can sometimes be, not health and happiness, but a sort of blind affirmation of the self. Like Irvine’s students (and borrowing his eloquent language), many of my students “were quickly and keenly aware of the Procrustean peril of essentializing either oneself or the other.” They also rejected the “certain relativism, even solipsism” that “could have dealt with the anxiety by explaining away learning as self-imposition; thus, one ought not to be ashamed, since in one’s experience there can be no real other to be ashamed about; all experience can ever do is express one’s own perspective, fill out one’s frame.” Irvine goes on to argue, as I do, that “given [a] programmatic commitment to affirming the hard positivity of others’ worlds,” that sort of solipsism is an inadequate response to the emotional challenges of immersive travel (Irvine 2015: 51).

One particular student unfortunately exemplified the relativism, solipsism, and refusal to encounter “the hard positivity of others’ worlds” that Irvine warns against. She wrote mysteriously in her pre-trip reflection that “my primary motivation for attending this trip is my desire to piece together the collective consciousness of the entire universe in order to transcend my own.” It seemed to me that, while abroad, this student floated free of her surroundings, from most of her student colleagues, and from the many Nepalis and Indians with whom we interacted. In contrast, outrage of my feminist four, their confusion and anger about my ambivalent response to their tale of sexism, and their subsequent check-in with a local (female) student about the situation, turned out to be pedagogical boon.

An Awareness Episode for the Professor

Studies on Black student participation in study abroad report low numbers compared to white peers, despite an upward trend in Black enrollment in institutions of higher education (Almassri, Welch, and Brunsting 2023; Boulden 2022; Marie and Sanders 2018; Lee and Green 2016; Lu et al. 2015; Patel 2021). The reasons commonly cited include fear of racism abroad, family opposition, a disconnect with the culture of study abroad, financial concerns, and commitment to a certain professional goal or graduation timeline that does not fit with study abroad (Almassri, Welch, and Brunsting 2023; Boulden 2022; Lee and Green 2016; Lu et al. 2015; Willis 2015). Black students studying abroad often experience microaggressions and worse from travel peers, and from locals in their host countries (Almassri, Welch, and Brunsting 2023; Marie and Sanders 2018; Willis 2015). At the same time, Black students overwhelmingly report positive benefits from studying abroad experiences, including personal, intercultural, and academic growth (Almassri, Welch, and Brunsting 2023; Lee and Green 2016; Lu et al. 2015; Willis 2015). According to studies, negative racial experiences are mitigated when Black students travel with a cohort of Black peers, when their faculty leader is Black, trusted, and/or experienced in the racial environment of the host country, and when their home institutions prepare them

¹⁹ See also Mitchell (2015: 57–58).

for the complicated racialized experiences they may have abroad and assist Black students in understanding and processing their experiences during and after travel (Almassri, Welch, and Brunsting 2023; Boulden 2022; Lee and Green 2016; Lu et al. 2015; Willis 2015). Black students especially benefit from heritage trips in which they have the opportunity to visit places with which they identify culturally and racially (Lee and Green 2016).

During the four iterations of my study abroad course, only two students of color have chosen to participate. One student was a Black American-born woman. The other identifies as bi-racial and has spent most of her life abroad, not in America. This statistic has something to do with the overwhelmingly white makeup of my institution, where only 21% of students identify as BIPOC and only 2.7% of students identify as Black/African American.²⁰ It also reflects a larger national trend in which Black students are less likely to study abroad than their white peers. Finally, it probably reflects both the marginalization of the religious studies discipline at my institution overall, and a perceived disconnect between South Asian and Black cultures and histories. In other words, were I to teach an environmental studies course in Kenya, I would be somewhat more likely to attract Black students.

The Black American-born student, whom I will call Sophie, expressed worry about experiencing racism abroad during orientation sessions. My co-leader and I validated her concerns, and asked her to keep channels of communication open during the trip should she wish to process any experience she might have, but we failed to offer anything more formal or structured. I was unable to locate any useful information about anti-Black racism in Nepal and had never before travelled there with a Black student.²¹ In addition, our global education office was offering very little in the way of pre-trip orientation for any students travelling abroad at the time. While in country, Sophie did not raise concerns about racialized dynamics with us. However, she wrote an “awareness episode,” which she submitted after returning to the U.S., in which she described hearing someone target her with a racial slur while visiting a vegetable market in Kathmandu with the group. Her reflection leaves some space for global differences in racial dynamics, stating, “I have no idea why he felt that it was okay to say the N word, but I am guessing he doesn’t know the long and harmful history of the word.” In working through this “unsettling” experience, Sophie suspects that it was her hair, which she “wore down in its full glory” that day, that may have drawn negative attention her way.

Sophie did not choose to share this experience with us, her faculty leaders, both of whom identify as white, during the trip—even with my co-leader who is a close mentor of hers—but instead processed it with her travel peers and remotely with friends and family members. She did, however, offer a constructive critique to my colleague and me during our post-travel class meetings. She suggested that we center anti-Black racism race as a topic in the course in future iterations if more Black students signed up to participate. In this suggestion, she is in line with best practices recommended by global educators committed to increasing equity and inclusion in study abroad programming, who urge trip leaders to reflect deeply on positionality and commit to orienting students of color pre-travel in order to prepare them for what they may encounter that is different from what their white peers may experience (Almassri, Welch, and Brunsting 2023; Lee and Green 2016; Lu et al. 2015; Willis 2015).

In a follow-up email to Sophie, I affirmed the importance of her comment but also urged her to use her Nepal experience to broaden her understanding of race and racialization beyond the American context. I reminded her that Nepal is a racially and ethnically diverse place and that “people negotiate difference in local ways in Nepal.” I also reminded her that she occupies a complex positionally as a relatively affluent American travelling abroad, one that included both racial and class elements. I wrote, “Being an American citizen, with

²⁰ 2024 census information from the Eckerd College Office of Institutional Effectiveness.

²¹ The most recognized forms of discrimination in Nepal are against low caste and indigenous people. There is a small literature on anti-Black racism among communities of South Asian heritage in England, the United States, and Canada. See, for instance, MadhavaRao (2021).

an American passport, the power of the American dollar behind you, as well as the general 'specialness' that comes from being American in Nepal, placed you in a position of privilege, whatever your racial identity. So, the experiences of racial marginalization you had must be understood within that very complex international context."

A whiff of defensiveness is palpable in my immediate response to Sophie's comments. As I recovered from jet lag and the mental exhaustion of leading the trip, however, I was inspired by Sophie's comments to learn more about racially inclusive and equitable study abroad pedagogy. Sophie's critique was my "awareness episode," in which I increased my knowledge of dynamics around race in the context of global education and unlearned any complacency I had allowed myself concerning diverse student positionalities.

Conclusion: "Moved and Curious"

Students at my liberal arts college are able to embark, without much academic preparation, upon journeys to politically, environmentally, and economically fragile places where they encounter radically unfamiliar cultures and societies. They are able to select from a menu of attractive sounding short study abroad courses in much the same way they might select a dish from a restaurant menu or a pair of shoes from a website. My institution does not require prerequisites for short-term study abroad courses as a rule, and, depending on the popularity of the trip, the selection process for acceptance onto the trip may not be rigorous. The main requirement is that students have a passport and are able to pay the fee. This ease of access (at least for the mostly white students with good cultural and financial access to study abroad that ended up in my course) muddies the line between tourism and global education in a way that is not ethically or academically defensible. The short-term course format, one that is increasingly popular at American universities and colleges, also can have the effect of lowering the bar for student commitment and preparation, though it doesn't necessarily have to, and may be an especially inclusive format for certain student populations, including BIPOC and first-generation students.

Despite these challenges, my students came to understand both religion and Buddhism in very sophisticated ways even in three weeks. Consider, for instance this passage from a student awareness episode focused on the experience of visiting the Mahābodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya, India:

I was moved and curious by the various forms of worship I saw, from meditation and chanting and placing one's forehead on the [main altar], to the various forms of circumambulating, from walking to the complex motion of stepping forward, reaching up, laying down, counting a bead, standing up, bring hands together over head, and repeating, all the around the perimeter of the temple. . . I wrote in my journal that seeing the variety in expressions of devotion reminded me of what I have learned about gender and gender performances. Rather than seeing the religious body, in this context, in a binary between "right" and "wrong" forms of worship, practice, and ritual, the religious body is, instead, uniquely and variously constructed. And though all of those bodies fall into the category of "Buddhist," that category was revealed to me to be not static, definitive, or clearly defined, but multiple, re-imagined, and shifting.

This student's observations about Buddhist devotion, and her subtle insights about "Buddhism" as a category, echoed motifs found across student writing from all iterations of the trip. In some ways, it is true that simply getting students to the Māyādevī Temple or the Mahābodhi Temple Complex is a Buddhist studies pedagogy that works.

Helping students to broaden and deepen their understanding of Buddhist doctrines, practices, and institutions should not, however, be the only pedagogical goal of Buddhist studies travel courses. Such courses can advance

students' understanding of religion and Buddhism, but when they involve encounters with cultural difference across gradients of power, they should also advance learning goals informed by postcolonial and antiracist perspectives. We can accomplish this by asking students to reflect on their own political, racial, gender, class, and religious positionality as they travel through foreign lands. We can encourage students to contemplate and put into practice the principles of ethical travel. We can invite sustained critical discussion of "global citizenship," a cherished liberal arts value, and how it differs from global tourism. We can also provide students with the critical tools to interrogate their participation in an international education culture that emphasizes adventure and self-enhancement over dialogue, engagement, and learning.

The experience of study abroad in global Buddhist spaces inevitably gives rise to countless "awareness episodes" that are marked by productively destabilizing feelings and thoughts. A combination of skillful curricula and embodied, compassionate, and, to the greatest extent humanly possible, trauma-aware pedagogies, can help students, and professors, negotiate this process of (shall we call it?) awakening.

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