

Teaching About Asian Religions

Students Interrogate Buddhism

Using the Reader Response Technique to Enhance Classroom Interaction

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As the main text of this article on page 55 of the fall 2010 issue of *Education About Asia* (Vol. 15, No. 2) suggests, the most frequently asked questions about Buddhism fall into several key categories. And, happily, they are directed at concepts which lie at the heart of Buddhism in contrast with other religions: the nature of enlightenment, the workings of karma, the definition of *anatman*, the role of texts and stories, and the role of women in the formation and contemporary practice of the religion. Other questions focus on concepts which are more historical, more subtle, or more specialized. Three areas in particular provide a helpful framework for thought when it comes to comparative religion: How Buddhism came to new lands; the distinction(s) between Theravada and Mahayana schools; and the actual worship practices of Buddhists in their own settings. We'll take each in turn.

Some students are particularly concerned with the attraction and spread of Buddhism, as in "Why would some people but not others decide to take it up? Based on what?" Or "Who was spreading the teaching? (Did people believe the stories they were told?) I feel like it's hard to spread something without proof like the texts." One international student probed even more deeply:

From my knowledge of China's history, merchants were at a very low social status in ancient China, so why did Buddhism become so accepted by the Chinese people? What is more, there were already some religions and philosophies in China and their beliefs were so different from those of Buddhism. How did it survive in the feudal society of China?

Clearly no classroom teacher can answer every question; "I don't know" is a reasonable, truthful response. The question(s) suggest, however, that a discussion of the mechanisms for spreading an idea is in order. How does any new idea or teaching come to life in new territory? Stories? Illustrations? Texts? Real-life exemplars or practitioners? Equally importantly, what needs on the part of the hearers might the new teaching address? Moreover, this presents an occasion to talk about accommodation and change in religions as they move from one locale and its culture to another. Religions are neither uniform nor unyielding; they grow (or diminish) and divide according to the perspective of the believer/practitioner.

The differences between Theravada and Mahayana schools are often the subject of textbook discussion. Usually these focus on three key characteristics:

- First, the Buddha as a man, an excellent teacher in Theravada, as opposed to the Buddha, or multiple Buddhas, as an almost godlike being capable of assisting practitioners to achieve nirvana in Mahayana.
- Second, the ideal of an *arhat*, one who has achieved

This article is a supplement to the Teaching Resources Essay on page 55 of the fall 2010 issue, *Education About Asia*. Because of space constraints, we were unable to include an extensive discussion of Dr. Ludwig's incorporation of the Reader Response Technique in teaching Buddhism. The following short essay is intended to supplement the longer print article.

enlightenment on one's own for one's own sake as opposed to that of a *bodhisattva*, or someone who postpones one's own enlightenment in order to work on behalf of the liberation of all individuals.

- Third, original texts which are understood to have come directly from the Buddha himself (for which the opening line "thus have I heard" operates as a guarantee of authenticity) in the case Theravada lineage, as opposed to new texts attributed to the Buddha but which are difficult to connect directly to him, paleographically, linguistically, or historically.

Students are sensitive to these differences, actively working out their own understanding with inquiries such as:

Mahayana Buddhism seems to bring faith into the picture much more (than Theravadan practice). And bodhisattvas remind me of something saint-like. Are these connections anywhere near true?

This presents an ideal opportunity to commend students for observing and making connections, but also to reflect on the apparent similarities between religions without falling into the trap of saying that all religions are essentially saying the same thing or heading to the same goal. The differences are part of what defines the trajectory and aspirations of each religion.

Finally, students are keen to know how Buddhists worship, as in "What do they actually **do** at the temple or at home?" This raises the twin consideration of religious belief and practice, sometimes called orthodoxy and orthopraxis respectively. Buddhists are often called "practitioners"; they *enact* their faith through rituals which are understood to transform the person who carries them out. This requires full bodied participation in chanting, reciting mantras, lighting incense, making offerings, prostrations, meditation, and, from time to time, ceremonies of repentance, and remembering. Moreover, while worship in a Buddhist sense does not involve prayer per se, some branches may engage in devotions directed to a specific Buddha or bodhisattva.

As previously discussed, the Reader Response Technique risks raising more questions than an individual faculty member might easily be able to answer. This can feel daunting. However, careful attention to the *categories* of the questions themselves uncovers areas of student concern and interest. An alert instructor who shapes his or her own personal reading and research agenda accordingly can, over time, build a focused and solid knowledge base capable of moving students from preconceptions or misgivings toward deeper personal engagement.