

A BUDDHIST IN THE CLASSROOM

BY SID BROWN

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS, 2008
174 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0791475980, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Joe Gawrys

In the Theravada Buddhist tradition of Southeast Asia, the Buddha was not a god or a savior, but a teacher. Sid Brown, who has a background as a Buddhist nun and now teaches Asian Studies at Sewanee: The University of the South, asked herself the question, “How does Buddhism influence the way I teach in twenty-first century America?” Her thoughts on that topic became the delightful book *A Buddhist in the Classroom*.

At first glance, the marriage of Buddhism and classroom teaching seems strange, but Brown quickly throws us into ideas that are very down to earth and practical. Like the Buddha touching the earth, Brown always begins with very concrete issues in her own classes and with her own students. For instance, various chapters discuss “Community in the Classroom,” “Learning from Students,” and “The Heart of Teaching.” In thinking about these issues, Brown may tell a story of the Buddha and how he taught, or she might describe a Buddhist practice or teaching.

For instance, one of the great Buddhist virtues is Mindfulness, or as Brown calls it, “cultivating attention.” Pay attention, pay attention, pay attention. “Many students in the US don’t notice how good it feels simply to pay attention to something,” Brown says. So, she has her students doing eye contact exercises and listening exercises. She even has students in her Buddhism in the Environment class sitting with trees each week and simply paying attention to them (this may be the only exercise in the book, though, that most teachers may not rush to adopt).

Just as Buddhism at its core is not a dogmatic, but rather an experiential religion, Brown also feels strongly that “learning is exploration.” Each student and each teacher is unique, and the grand experiment of education is continually trying new practices and seeing the results. Teachers need to grow, and teachers need to give students room to grow. As Brown puts it, “there’s wisdom in giving students the room they need to surprise themselves with their learning.” “Education is moment-to-moment birthing,” she says.

A Buddhist in the Classroom ends with thirty-two useful pages of Brown’s “Nifty Assignments” and “Handouts.” Some of these are particular to the classes she teaches, such as “Fieldwork for Asian Religions—Visits to Temples.” Some, though, like her handouts on “Sleep and Sleep Deprivation” or “Your Class Journal,” are useful for just about everyone.

Brown took a chance by titling this book *A Buddhist in the Classroom*. Some might be put off by Buddhism, and some might be put off by the very idea of bringing religious values into education. You don’t have to be Buddhist or religious, though, to profit from Brown’s keen

insights into teaching. And something seems to be working for Brown. In the spring of 2009, shortly after the publication of this book, Sid Brown was voted Sewanee’s *Teacher of the Year*.

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BROTHERS

BY YU HUA

TRANSLATED BY EILEEN CHENG-YIN AND CARLOS ROJAS

NEW YORK: PANTHEON, 2009

641 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0375424991, HARDCOVER

Reviewed by Howard Giskin

Brothers is an epic saga of step-brothers, Baldi Li and Song Gang, whose lives span four decades from the Cultural Revolution to the present Socialist-Capitalist society in China. Yu Hua uses deliberately coarse language that reflects not only the dust, dirt, ugliness, greed, stupidity, but also the humor, endurance, and cleverness of a people buffeted by change. *Brothers* evokes the grotesque, but also beauty, through rough, racy, earthy language, and might bear comparison with Günter Grass’s *The Tin Drum*.

While *Brothers* chronicles the vicissitudes of the “brothers” Baldi Li and Song Gang, the book follows them in epic style over the course of four tumultuous decades. Some of the more interesting characters are less prominent figures, like swindler Wandering Zhou, and Song Gang’s biological father (Baldi Li’s step-father), Song Fanping. He is perhaps the most sympathetically and roundly portrayed individual in the book, and is the victim of unspeakable violence during the Cultural Revolution.

Brothers is not recommended for the secondary classroom because of graphic violence and frequent sexually explicit language, though it may be appropriate for university courses dealing with modern China in the second half of the twentieth century up to the present. I would recommend that instructors who wish to use Yu Hua’s novel include ample secondary historical and or sociological sources to provide context, as well as, if possible, non-fiction chronicles or autobiographical writings, to create as wide and as broad a perspective as possible on China in the past half century. ■

HOWARD GISKIN has taught in the Department of English at Appalachian State University, in Boone, North Carolina, since 1989. He works mainly in the area of World Literature, with particular interest in Asia and Latin America. He has edited two books related to Chinese culture, *Chinese Folktales* (NTC, 1997), and with Bettye S. Walsh, *An Introduction to Chinese Culture through the Family* (SUNY Press, 2001).