

# NEW YORK CITY AS CLASSROOM

## EXPLORING BUDDHISM THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

By Chaya Chandrasekhar and Ihor Pidhainy

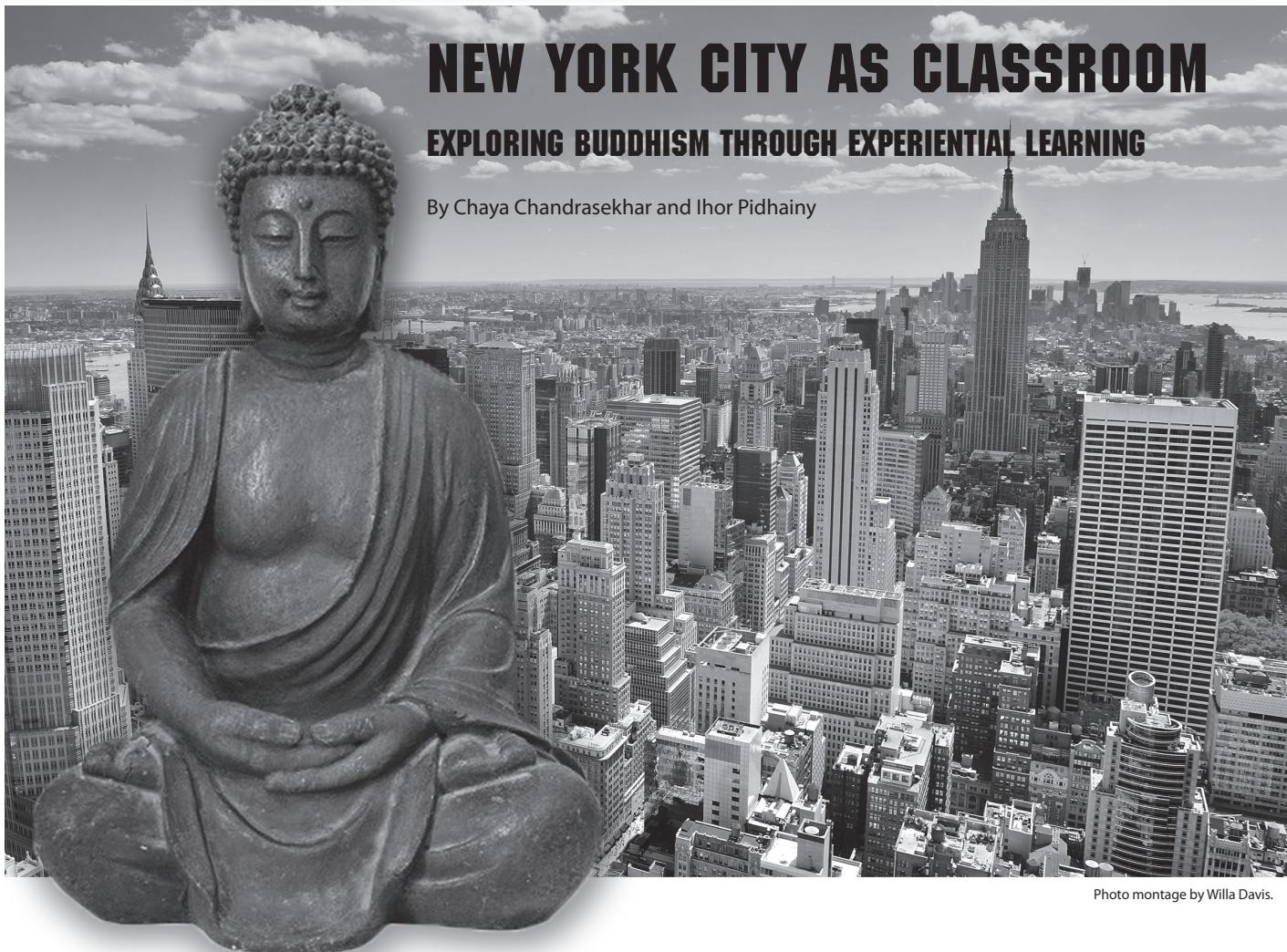


Photo montage by Willa Davis.

Experiential learning can be particularly useful when teaching about Asia, as few students in an introductory course come with much knowledge about the region's vast history, distinct cultures, and complicated political and social structures. Nevertheless, how does an instructor provide students direct experience of Asia without planning expensive study abroad opportunities or site visits? How does an educator encourage engagement with Asia without relying entirely on guest speakers or informational films shown in the classroom? This essay recounts an experiential learning component offered at Marietta College, a liberal arts college in the Midwest, that focused on Asian religion. Specifically, it addresses how a learning community of students explored Buddhist history, art, and practice through a four-day study excursion to New York City in spring 2013.

Many colleges today offer learning communities as a way to introduce freshmen students to the institution and help them build an intellectual community.<sup>1</sup> In a learning community, a group of students takes two or more related courses together. These courses are typically interdisciplinary with a common theme or are designed so that one course trains students within a discipline, while the other provides foundational skills like written or verbal communication. The aim of a learning community is to build camaraderie and foster peer learning.<sup>2</sup>

Marietta College recently established an Asian Studies program. This interdisciplinary program includes both a major and minor and requires coursework in language and literature, history, and art history, with electives available in international business, leadership, and music. Offering a learning community with an Asia focus appeared to be an effective way to publicize the new program and build student interest.

The learning community was first offered in spring 2011 and repeated more recently in 2013. Each time, the community took the study of Buddhism as its focus. A group of students signed up for two classes: a history course, which addressed the history and practices of the religion; and an art history course, which explored Buddhism's rich visual tradition. The history course began with the origins of Buddhism in its South Asian context and traced its development as it spread to the Himalayan regions and to Central and East Asia. Topics examined included the foundational principles and ethics of Buddhism, the religion's divergence into major branches, the complexities of sectarian divisions, and the multiplication of schools both within South Asia and beyond. The class also explored devotional aspects of Buddhism and other forms of religious practice. The art history course emphasized the role that the visual arts have played since the earliest days of the religion and how they continue to do so today. As a major focus of the art history course, students examined Buddhist architecture, sculpture, painting, and ritual implements to understand how art and material culture express the complex philosophies and highest aspirations of the tradition. Students learned to read and decode visual imagery and analyze the ways in which art communicates Buddhist methods and goals of attainment. Much like the history course, the art history class traced the development of Buddhist art in India and examined, as the religion traversed Asia, the ways in which the visual tradition shifted to accommodate new practices and local tastes.

Covering a similar timeframe and geographical area, both classes worked in tandem to provide students with a more comprehensive understanding of Buddhism. Traditionally, the study of the religion

focuses on Buddhist literature and textual sources. Buddhist art additionally can be read as visual texts, and Buddhist visual culture frequently provides information not easily accessible in religious literature.<sup>3</sup> The two courses therefore provided students the opportunity to simultaneously engage both the literary and visual aspects of the religion and explore how each informs the other.

The learning community's demographic included a wide range of students. The majority was strongly rooted in the arts and humanities, but there were also students who majored in business and economics, finance, computer science, and engineering. Although the diverse disciplinary training that students brought to the learning community enriched the classes, the range of student backgrounds also posed certain challenges for the two courses. The art history class instructor faced the difficulty of balancing the work between students with a more advanced understanding of the visual arts with those that were newcomers to the field who had to be trained in visual vocabulary, visual analyses, and effectively integrating visual study with historical information. For the history course, similarly, there were students who felt comfortable with writing papers in the humanities and those who struggled with textual analyses and writing to the requirements of the discipline.

An additional issue arose with the divide between the Asian Studies majors—several of whom had taken at least two or more courses on Asia, had some language training, and had studied abroad in China—with those students who had little to no knowledge of Asia. The classes also included students from China, some of whom were practicing Buddhists. Because of their familiarity, the Asian Studies majors and the international students tended to grasp cultural nuances and contextualized Buddhist practices more easily than those unfamiliar with the study of Asia. For example, the importance of filial piety in the Chinese tradition and the need for Buddhism to accommodate this belief were clear to students who had completed courses on East Asia, but for others, why Buddhist monks cut their hair as part of practice, bared their shoulders, or remained unmarried required further discussion.<sup>4</sup> Such instances provided rich opportunity for peer-to-peer learning in the classroom. Eager to share their experiences, students with backgrounds in Asia would take the lead in attempting to explain concepts and ideas to their classmates. Time and again, moments of confusion over Asia and Asian religions transformed into animated class discussion. For the instructors, such moments presented openings to discuss the complexity of Asian societies and civilizations, encouraging students to move beyond approaching Asia in monolithic terms.

The myriad practices of Buddhism particularly puzzled students, whether they were familiar with Asia or otherwise. The two classes emphasized the predominance of temples, rituals, meditation, and devotion in Buddhism while discussing how images play a significant role in ritual performances and in defining sacred space. Even students who had visited Asia frequently raised questions about regional or sectarian variances in art and practice methodologies. For example, students asked about the relationship of a *stupa*, or pagoda architecture, to *mandalas*, ritual diagrams, or comparisons between Vajrayana practice in Nepal and Tibet to the Shingon esoteric tradition in Japan. The Judeo-Christian backgrounds of the majority of students in the courses left them confused about what it meant to be a practicing Buddhist. They held to different views on ritual obligations, devotional commitments, and religious imagery and iconography. This pointed to the significance of including an experiential learning component to the course to introduce to students firsthand these aspects of the tradition.

Nevertheless, providing students in North American colleges, universities, and high schools direct access to the varied Buddhist practices can be challenging. Although travel to Asia would be the most

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effective manner in which to provide experiential learning, it is frequently too expensive and requires time beyond what a semester-long course typically allows.<sup>5</sup> It is possible to bring outside practitioners into the classroom to speak to students or demonstrate a ritual. However, this does not convey the sense of community and sacred space that is so integral to Buddhist ritual and practice. Schools in major urban centers are within easy reach of Buddhist temples, museums with Buddhist art and material culture collections, and meditation centers that may be visited for instructional purposes outside the classroom. In other parts of North America, however, access to nearby centers is scarce. To allow students the richest possible direct experience, when the Buddhism learning community was first offered in 2011, the course piloted a trip to Washington, DC. The two-day study trip included visits to a Buddhist temple in Fairfax, Virginia, and the Buddhist art collections at the Freer and Sackler Galleries of Art, part of the Smithsonian Museums. After their time in Washington, DC, students in the learning community remarked favorably about the trip in the short field reports that they wrote as part of a class assignment and on the course evaluations at the end of the semester. The deeper understanding that the students obtained from the visits to the temple and museums produced better results on tests and other forms of learning assessments in the courses. The positive response to the experiential component in the pilot course encouraged the instructors to build on it when the Buddhism learning community was offered again. In spring 2013, the class extended the experiential learning opportunity to a four-day trip to New York City.

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Figure 1. Shrine, Kadampa Meditation Center, midtown Manhattan. Photo provided by Kadampa Center.

*Aside from the art and religious institutions, Manhattan provides opportunities to introduce students to various other aspects of Asian culture.*

Manhattan contains some of the best Asian art museums and cultural institutions in the US. The Rubin Museum and the Metropolitan Museum offer world-class collections of Buddhist art.<sup>6</sup> At the Rubin, students were struck by not only the outstanding displays, but also the story of the long history of private collection and benefaction of Buddhist artwork.<sup>7</sup> The Metropolitan Museum allowed students to observe and experience up-close works of art they had studied in class and read about in their textbook. For the instructors, the enthusiastic discussions between students as they analyzed an object, directly applying course content, were particularly rewarding.

Art and cultural institutions like the Tibet House and the Asia Society provide unique opportunities for studying Asia in New York City.<sup>8</sup> The Tibet House, established at the request of the Dalai Lama to raise awareness about Tibet and its culture heritage, presented opportunities for students to explore Buddhist politics and activism. Students spoke at length with the director, Mr. Ganden Thurman, who introduced them to the Tibet House's repatriation program, which preserves Tibetan cultural artifacts. Students also had the chance to examine firsthand a Tibetan Buddhist shrine lit with butter lamps and festooned with votive silk banners. Additionally, they examined a hand-constructed, three-dimensional mandala and viewed an exhibit of contemporary Buddhist art.

Manhattan also offers a wide variety of Asian communities and a representation of different branches of Buddhism. One may go to a Mahayana Pureland temple; a center for Vajrayana (Tibetan) practice; or a Theravada Buddhist temple, where a

variety of subgroupings exist and different languages are used in veneration, including Mandarin, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, Sinhalese, Tibetan, Thai, Burmese, and English. Students in the learning community visited a Tibetan center of the Kadam School in midtown Manhattan.<sup>9</sup> The shrine in the center's meditation room included traditional representations of the Kadam lineage, including sculptures of Shakyamuni Buddha, Prajnaparamita, and Shadakshari Avalokiteshvara, but created by using new materials and technologies (see Figure 1).

A Zen temple in the Sōn Korean tradition run by a Western master in two adjacent apartments in lower Manhattan provided students with a different experience of Buddhist practice.<sup>10</sup> Here, students had the opportunity to practice meditation for ten minutes (Figure 2). Following the introduction to this vital Buddhist practice, they participated in religious dialogue with the resident master, a middle-aged American with considerable practice experience. On visiting the house temple, students discussed issues of sacred space and how material objects helped define



Figure 2. Students practicing meditation led by meditation master. Chogye International Zen Center of New York. Photo by Chaya Chandrasekhar.

it within the ordinary confines of a New York City apartment. They commented on how difficult or easy it was to meditate and how trying it firsthand gave them a better understanding of (and deeper admiration for) the practice. They admitted surprise at learning that the three practitioners present at the temple during the visit were Westerners with years of experience. This countered their beliefs that Buddhism was a religion relegated to Asia and that the Buddhist diaspora was a recent phenomenon in the West. The question-and-answer session with the master also surprised many of the students. Some felt quite engaged in the Sōn tradition, while others struggled to internalize the oblique, circuitous nature of the dialogue and instruction.

Aside from the art and religious institutions, Manhattan provides opportunities to introduce students to various other aspects of Asian culture. Students tried a variety of cuisines, explored Chinatown, attended performances, and struck up conversations on the street with Buddhist monks. The wealth of objects they witnessed in the museums, the brief immersive practice at the temples, and encountering the range of practitioners—Westerners and Asians, young and old, monastic and lay—provided students an altogether rich view of Buddhism as an active, contemporary, socially engaged world religion.

The experiential element of the learning community added a dimension to the courses that was otherwise impossible to recreate in a classroom. Upon their return, students completed two class assignments. First, working in groups, they designed a mock art exhibit for which they picked a theme, decided on a title, selected works of art from those they had seen in the museum collections for display in the mock exhibit, and researched their topics to develop exhibition didactics (introductory panels, labels, charts, and other supporting materials). Tying the content from both courses of the learning community, this assignment required each group to analyze the visual object and locate it within its historical and religious context. Second, students wrote a reflection paper in which they were asked to think about both their time in New York and the course content of the learning community, evaluating how the fundamental principles and practices of Buddhism work within contemporary society. From these assignments, it was evident that through the study opportunity in New York City students came to understand Buddhist community and ritual practice far differently than they had before applied study. The students' brief participation in meditation demystified the practice and allowed them to grasp Buddhism in terms of experience. The ritual practices transformed the texts that students had engaged with in the classroom, making the words more meaningful. Observing images and ritual implements within the environs of a temple or shrine allowed students to understand how aesthetics and function merge seamlessly within the Buddhist context. Students saw firsthand how a painting, sculpture, or manuscript had a ritual function that held meaning and importance within a community. Unlike a recorded performance, a live experience provided deeper insight.

While art historians commonly use museum collections as an effective instructional tool, historians more customarily rely on texts. If historians approach artwork, it may be to corroborate a textual narrative. However, objects and texts seldom accurately complement each other. Rather, each provides information that contributes to a fuller understanding. Therefore, providing opportunities for the students to question and critically assess textual history through the lens of art objects is an effective pedagogical approach.

For the art historian, visual analysis goes beyond formal appreciation of artworks to include the larger historical, social, political, and religious contexts for their production and use. In the classroom, it is possible to include images that show the original settings of cultural artifacts or even have students explore artifacts on their own through

readings and Internet searches. However, seeing objects within a museum or shrine transforms understanding in ways that other methods do not. The visual aspect of the object in the collections at the Metropolitan Museum or the Rubin still dominates, but in the displays at the Tibet House, which bridges the gap between a museum and shrine, students began to evaluate firsthand how objects are more than items for beautiful display and passive viewing.

In New York City, separated from the classroom and through individuals unconnected to their instructors, both text and image came to life for the learning community. What point was there for a group of middle-aged American Sōn Buddhists to invite a dozen students and their instructors into their apartment/temple and teach them meditation and answer (or not) their questions about this tradition? How might this pertain to the notion of generosity (Skt. *dāna*) and reciprocity in Buddhism? How might this relate to the notion of the self (Skt. *ātman*) and no-self (Skt. *anātman*) that had bewildered students in readings and class discussion? How might students begin to navigate different worldviews to become more critically aware of their own? How might Buddhism open windows of understanding between others and themselves? Such thoughts, revealed in the students' reflection papers, affirmed the value of experiential learning. ■

## NOTES

1. On learning communities, see Anastasia P. Samaras et al., eds., *Learning Communities in Practice* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008).
2. On peer-to-peer learning, see David Boud, Ruth Cohen, and Jane Sampson, *Peer Learning in Higher Education: Learning from and with Each Other* (London: Routledge, 2001).
3. For a discussion of how works of Buddhist art serve as historical documents to be analyzed alongside literary evidence, see Rob Linrothe, *Ruthless Compassion: Wrathless Deities in Early Indo-Tibetan Esoteric Buddhist Art* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), 3-5.
4. Cutting one's hair went against the notion of the body being a gift from one's parents, and critics would cite the *Classic of Filial Piety* (Xiaojing), a Warring States text; baring the shoulder was considered immodest (whether by male or female); and not begetting offspring was the most unfilial of acts, according to Mencius 4A: 26.
5. Many spring semester courses include international visits to Europe or South America over the spring break week. Asia's distance from North America makes a seven-day visit a less fruitful enterprise.
6. The Brooklyn Museum of Art and Newark Museum in New Jersey also hold strong Asian art collections and may be easily accessed from Manhattan. Other cities that offer strong Buddhist/Asian art collections include Boston (Boston Museum of Fine Arts), Philadelphia (Philadelphia Museum of Art), Chicago (Art Institute of Chicago), Cleveland (Cleveland Museum of Art), Kansas City (Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art), San Francisco (Asian Art Museum of San Francisco), Los Angeles (Los Angeles County Museum of Art), and Seattle (Seattle Art Museum).
7. The museum houses the private collection of Donald and Shelly Rubin, avid collectors of Himalayan art since the early 1970s.
8. For more on the Tibet House, see <http://www.tibethouse.us/>. For the Asia Society, see <http://asiasociety.org/>.
9. Kadampa Meditation Center at 127 West Twenty-Fourth Street, <http://meditationinnewyork.org/>.
10. Chogye International Zen Center of New York at 400 East Fourteenth Street, <http://www.chogyezencenter.org/>.

CHAYA CHANDRASEKHAR is Assistant Professor of Art History at Marietta College, Marietta, Ohio. Her area of specialization is South Asian art, with a focus on the Buddhist art of India. Her current research interests include post-independence and contemporary Indian photography.

IHOR PIDHAINY is an Assistant Professor of Chinese History in the Department of History, Philosophy, and Religion at Marietta College. He specializes in intellectual history of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644).