

Students Interrogate Buddhism

Using the Reader Response Technique to Enhance Classroom Interaction

By Jeannette Ludwig

Good teachers know that feedback to students is essential to learning. Often overlooked, however, is feedback to instructors, which is indispensable for quality teaching. And good teaching often takes place without feedback to instructors. But, excellent, highly-involved teachers benefit from knowing what is on students' minds, because this is the "real curriculum." This is what motivates and ultimately satisfies them. When faculty know what interests their students, they are far more likely to harness the energy of that inherent curiosity on particular points. Faculty who know when and where students have misgivings or misperceptions can steer the classroom discussions to areas of concern and head off potential difficulties.

This article outlines the Reader Response Technique (RRT). RRT is a pedagogical strategy that requires students to submit written questions to instructors about aspects of content they are studying. What follows are illustrations from student inquiries in an undergraduate course on Buddhism. Working from a content analysis of the questions and answers over the course of a semester, the fundamental areas of student interest and inquiry will be identified. The results can serve as a framework for preparing and presenting a high school unit or college course on Buddhism. The goal here is not so much to supply

variations, the potential upsets, and the lived experience(s) of the students seated before them. This invaluable information can and should shape the content of instruction, particularly in domains that are likely to test student (and teacher!) presuppositions. Finally, textbooks or curricula may contain elements that distract from or distort students' understanding of the material, and the RRT allows teachers to readily notice terms, descriptors, translations, or stories that inadvertently mislead students as they strive to master new concepts.

Secondary and college-level educators must often work with curricula that "tag all the bases" to coordinate multiple sections or mandatory coverage. In some cases, instructors may not feel they have the expertise to teach all aspects of Buddhism. The RRT allows them to identify the issues that matter most to students, allowing them to navigate the territory between "have to know" and "want to know," two very powerful but very different factors in learning. Faculty members who use the RRT expand their own learning horizon, and find themselves in a new and exciting relationship with the material, with their students, and with themselves as investigators or researchers as the semester unfolds. The work stops being about *what* and moves to the more durable and touching aspects of *how* and *why*.

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definitive answers, but to reveal the powerful cultural frameworks, underlying questions, and even personal unease that can exist in a class on Buddhism. This technique is applicable to other religions or areas of study as well. When teachers are familiar with the territory, they can better serve their students at the same time they deepen their own encounter with the material and find their own answers.

The Reader Response Technique provides a three-fold benefit in student-teacher interaction. First, it establishes a low-risk forum for finding out what matters to students in ways that do not single out or make public demands on individual students who, for various good reasons, might wish their queries to remain anonymous to their peers. Second, reader responses allow the faculty member to establish a direct, running dialogue with individual students, a genuine tie of significant value in otherwise impersonal or particularly challenging classes. Third, if done on a weekly or every-other-week basis throughout the semester, the RRT acts as a subtle encouragement to keep up with the reading assignments, and to reflect critically on lecture content.

Additional teacher-oriented benefits accrue as well: handled properly, reader responses provide instructors with insight into the moti-

Students are not always confident in framing their queries, particularly in courses that present entirely novel ideas or approaches. They are therefore reluctant to "expose their ignorance" (as they see it) in front of their peers. In class, it is not unusual to hear a prefacing comment such as "This may be a dumb question, but..." Just as frequently, students are anxious not to offend their peers (or the teacher), or they may hesitate to ask a question because they assume it is "off point." The RRT artfully establishes that questions are the norm, and that questions are—in and of themselves—precisely *how* we learn. Moreover, the RRT puts in place a mechanism for students to take responsibility for what they learn.

Classroom dynamics vary considerably from one setting to another. As education becomes a global undertaking, and as the face of America's own students changes, an increasing number of students in any given classroom may come from families or cultures where Buddhism is practiced. Known in foreign language teaching circles as "heritage learners," their learning needs differ from traditional students. While some may have first-hand knowledge of texts or practices, they are most likely not familiar with the entire scope of the religious

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teachings or its history. Such students should not be presumed to be a source of information; indeed they may have genuine questions of their own which may be slightly different from those of their peers.¹ Reader responses cover the ground equitably and sensitively, allowing the teacher to bring the most crucial items to the attention of the entire class without pinpointing specific individuals. Students find this both informative and reassuring.

For best results, the RRT should count as part of the participation portion of the grade to encourage active involvement from everyone. On the last day of the week, students submit three questions in writing (on paper or via e-mail) based on the reading or lecture. (Practice shows that these are easier to answer if the students include a lecture date or the page number where the material in question was presented.) The instructor then answers each student's questions in a line or two. The process need not be time-consuming. For particularly sticky issues, multiple queries on the same topic will appear, necessitating a more fully thought-out response which can be addressed in one, or both, of two ways: Multiple copies of longer responses can be given to those who posed the question, or the issue can be addressed to the class as a whole in the next class meeting. Either way, the students who asked the questions are pleased to have answers, while others are served indirectly by seeing what the conceptual territory looks like, given the kinds of problems their peers have identified.

Initially, when the material is absolutely new and unfamiliar, it takes a week or two for students to limit themselves to just three questions. It should be pointed out to them that the winnowing process itself is a useful learning tool as it forces them to weigh the relative depth or merit of each question. The RRT is especially helpful in courses that meet only once a week, as it encourages students to reflect on the material in the time gap between class sessions. Moreover, it subtly strengthens the teacher-student link that might be absent in courses that meet less frequently.

Careful study of the batches of questions from students in two iterations of a Buddhism course reveals three chief areas of student concern: First, students are supremely curious about the critical Buddhist teachings themselves. Second, as the Buddhism unit or course may be among students' initial deep encounter with a culture other than their own, questions about social practices arise. The role of women provides an excellent example. Here, too, challenges about contrasts with Judeo-Christian history and practice come up. Third, and in a different vein from the foregoing, some students may view a course in Buddhism as a foray into an attractive alternative to the religious practice they may have grown up with or observed. While it is inappropriate for a faculty member in most contemporary educational contexts to respond to such questions, they are, inevitably, a backdrop to the teaching-learning process. An overarching framework for looking at patterns of faith in various global settings of the sort presented in college-level textbooks of world religions can begin to satisfy those questions, setting a course for life-long learning.

The remainder of this work takes up each of these avenues of inquiry in turn and concludes with a few additional considerations.

Nirvana and karma are terms that students hear frequently in conversation and in the media, particularly in the world of advertising. Hence, instructors should keep in mind that good teaching practices help students separate popular (mis)conceptions from authentic teachings. Faculty members will want to examine their own sources for information about these concepts in particular, tailoring them to the context and intellectual needs of the students, based on the best available current scholarship. The notion of 'non-self' or *anatman* receives a good deal of scrutiny by serious students, as does rebirth. A sampling of student questions demonstrates a concern about how and why enlightenment is a worthy pursuit:

Shouldn't Enlightenment be the ultimate goal anyway?

Are Buddhists expected to reach Enlightenment in just one life?

How many Buddhists reach Enlightenment?

If they work hard their whole lives to become enlightened, do they have a chance to pick up where they left off in the next life?

Does being enlightened mean that you are no longer tempted by earthly things, or is it through a lifelong practice and final achievement that you just learn to live without them?

The nature of karma and its role in rebirth is also a mystery that receives a good deal of reflection:

If Buddhists are to live a non-violent lifestyle therefore they aren't to partake in the army. What would happen if a Buddhist were drafted? Would he have to serve? And (if he did), would there be any way of redeeming himself, or would karma still consider turning the human into a hungry ghost or an animal . . . due to their violation of the non-violent lifestyle that is to be led by Buddhists?

Global studies curricula are designed to reduce ethnocentrism, allowing students to reflect on their own values of society, religions, and how they function. And indeed, institutional and social behavior constitutes the second area of student concern. For example, depending on the extent to which they are taken up by the text or the teacher, the RRT regularly elicits queries that touch on the role of women in an America edging toward equality for women as a reality and not an aspiration:

How can a religion that preaches compassion, understanding, and equality be such the opposite in terms of women?

Why did the Buddha say that the dharma would degenerate faster if women were allowed into the sangha?

In one round of RRT, unbeknownst to each other, two women who sat across the aisle in class submitted the following questions:

How can monastics imagine themselves on the path to Enlightenment when they display, outwardly or not, bias towards women? Why has it taken so long to change?

and

When I was growing up in South Korea I was taught that a woman's body was inferior to a man's from many Buddhist teachers. How can one be sure which practice is right for me to follow?

Moreover, given the Judeo-Christian backdrop to American understanding of religious matters, some students are struck by the contrast between the legends and texts used to tell the Buddhist story and the received wisdom of their biblical training. Some argue the plausibility of the legends, finding fault with its “lack of historicity” as compared with the perceived “facts” of Christianity. The skillful teacher will use such questions as an opportunity to inspect the presupposition that any religion comes to us fully formed and will remain unchanged throughout time or across cultures.

Moreover, in the light of questions such as the following, it is obvious that careful historical groundwork must be laid when it comes to teaching religions.

The book says that “parents are sacred to their children” and the child worships them. Is this drawn from the fifth commandment of honoring your father and mother, or is it just common respect?

Sometimes students may not always have accurate information about their own tradition, as demonstrated by this example:

Why are there five minimum obligations (the precepts) when in Christianity there are twelve (the twelve commandments)?

Finally, on a more personal level, in an America that is both decidedly religious and increasingly secular or non-believing, students bring their own motivations to the classroom. Their own journey of faith may well have motivated them to take an elective that focuses on religion so they may look to a Buddhism unit or course for answers. Such students may be actively searching for guidance or a toehold in their quest for a Buddhist identity. “Heritage learners” may be looking for a more mature relationship to Buddhism, often in ways that can be explained in Westerners’ terms. And, as already seen in one of the questions above, other students are concerned to know which of the main Buddhist branches is the “true” teaching, the “real Buddhism.” Some admit that they are concerned with “getting it right,” that is, not choosing “the wrong branch to pursue.” One individual provided insight into the thinking of many in the class (with phrasing reproduced exactly as written):

One of the things that attracted me to Buddhism was that there was no “wishy-washy” god-talk like there is in Christianity.

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Americans often expect a good deal from religion. Students—whether religious, seekers, or doubters—are no exception.

Looking @ Mahayana Buddhism I feel like there is more theology to it. First, Mahayana seems to bring faith into concepts much more, unlike Theravada. Next each bodhisattva reminds me of something saint-like. Are these connections anywhere near true?

Another student challenged the practice of praying to the Buddha in times of trouble, “even though in reality they know it can do no good”:

This makes religion seem like it is just a comfort zone that people turn to in times of need, but in reality it is nothing but a bunch of ceremonies and practices.

Not surprisingly, whether they are religious or not, some students are inquisitive—incredulous even—about the motivation for choosing and maintaining a life as a monk or a nun. Those who have never encountered the idea of monastic practice find it peculiar or even frightening (“Why on earth would someone leave their family and everything they know . . . ?”) Too, because photographs in published sources, educational media, or guest lectures often include Buddhist monks and nuns as a means of highlighting local color, it is not unusual for some students to infer that *all* Buddhists are monastics. They may need to be reassured that while in some cultures it may be the norm for young boys to spend time as apprentice monks, lay practitioners far outnumber their monastic counterparts and indeed support them through alms or *dana* (giving). Addressing such questions individually or collectively in class not only helps students recognize other ways of living, it also introduces them to some of the deepest, most compelling aspects of human life.

From time to time, national or international events take center stage. The protests during the lead up to the 2008 Olympics are a case in point, provoking curiosity about relations between China and Tibet and the Dalai Lama’s spiritual or religious role in the matter. Moreover, to many young adults in our classrooms, the face of Buddhism today is His Holiness, the Dalai Lama. Once acquainted with Tibet and its spiritual practices, they frequently ask “How did the Dalai Lama get so popular?” This presents an ideal occasion to discuss his Holiness’ peaceful attempts to negotiate fair treatment for his homeland and his 1989 Nobel Peace Prize, together with his people’s deep reverence for him and his position, the machinery of publicity, the effects of media depictions, and the influence of star-power. A line in one Zen meal *gatha* (verse) reads “First seventy-two labors brought us this food, we should know how it comes to us.” In the same way, teachers and students will benefit from studying the quality of information that comes to them, or how it is packaged and delivered. The results can profitably spill into other disciplines as well.

Americans often expect a good deal from religion. Students—whether religious, seekers, or doubters—are no exception. They may even idealize Buddhism as “the one religion that doesn’t seem to have an ax to grind” politically or organizationally. The RRT reveals a couple of areas where students are surprised to find their high regard for Buddhism to be unfounded:

Tendai priests had Honen’s priests beheaded. How would they justify that, being Buddhists?

There have been a few mentions of how Mahayana Buddhists look down upon and insulted Theravada Buddhism. Given human nature, it can’t have been one-sided. How can they denigrate fellow Buddhists?

Queries such as these can be the springboard for making two significant points. First, religion and society co-exist and shape each other. Religious institutions reflect and are influenced by the mores and practices of the societies in which they exist. Second, while it might tarnish the luster of valued religious institutions, lack of perfection does not vitiate their contributions to human life as a whole. As William James observed, “Wisdom is knowing what to overlook.”

In addition to “just learning the material,” young people in a religion class are dealing, sometimes very much on their own, with very big personal, cultural, and spiritual issues. The RRT allows them to reflect on their values, dig deeper, or quarrel with the content, thereby taking their learning personally and seriously. As comedian/commentator Bill Maher observed, “Americans are interested in things that are immediate, easy to understand, and have celebrities involved.” Every student has misgivings and concerns about what he or she is asked to absorb. Giving their questions a non-threatening means of expression and taking them seriously, not only relieves underlying tensions, it serves as an enriching educational tool. The Reader Response Technique thus moves both educators and students below the surface of the teaching-learning process. ■

Editor’s note: Readers interested in a more extensive discussion of Jeannette Ludwig’s Reader Response Technique on teaching Buddhism may visit the “Free Materials” section on the EAA Web site tool bar, then choose “Supplemental Materials” from the pull-down menu for the link to her classroom interactions that supplement this article.

NOTES

1. For example,

Nowadays in China many monks are orphans adopted by old monks and are raised up in temples. They may live a monastic life for their whole life. They study scriptures and never participate in any social activities. Is it a good way to keep a purified lifestyle? How can they attain enlightenment? Is it necessary to become a monk or a nun to learn Buddhism?

Historical records indicate that Buddhism was brought into China by merchants from Central Asia. 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 at the time of Buddhism, and their beliefs were so different from those in Buddhism. How did it survive in the feudal society of China?

Can one practice Buddhist teachings without actually believing in nirvana, karma, or reincarnation?

JEANNETTE LUDWIG is Associate Professor of French Linguistics and affiliate member of the Asian Studies Program at the University at Buffalo where she teaches Asian Religions and Buddhism. A recipient of the Chancellor’s Award for Excellence in Teaching, she has traveled in China and Japan, and researched *dalit* (Indians of inherited low status) issues in India. A practicing Buddhist, she co-chaired the planning committee for the Interfaith Service on the occasion of the visit of His Holiness the Dalai Lama to the University at Buffalo.