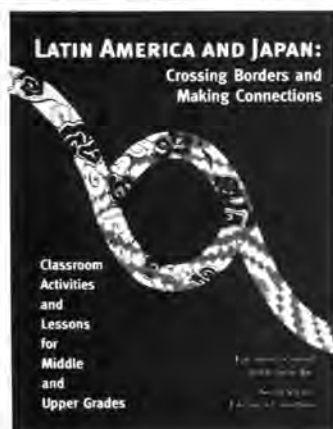


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What the Situation Demands Teaching Buddhism Through Life Stories

By Sidney Brown

An earlier version of this manuscript was presented as part of a symposium entitled "Teaching Asian Thought" held at the Association for Asian Studies 2000 annual meeting in San Diego. We would like to thank Professor Kevin Schilbrack of Wesleyan College who chaired the symposium and provided us with the original papers.

Students at my college come from isolated rural areas, from small towns with an average population of 200. They are often the first of their families to attend college, and their view of the world is usually narrow. While they would never claim to be *against* any group of people, many of their actions and patterns of thought exclude most of the world's population. They tend to assume most people are like themselves. Thus they assume that most of the world is Protestant, from a small town, and has enjoyed a middle-class upbringing. They assume most people have hot water and telephones and cars.

As the professor of world religions at a small liberal arts college, I daily consider how to help my students broaden their understanding of the world and of the many different ways we are in the world: our many different ways of conceiving what the world is. One of my most successful classes has been a class on Buddhism. Here I reflect on the questions I asked because I was in this particular environment and how I was able to answer those questions in a way that helped my students and I work our way through the course.

The mission statement of the college where I teach includes a recognition of our commitment "to those standards . . . which guide members . . . on issues of personal integrity, moral responsibility, social justice, humane sensitivity and citizenship."¹ In designing my courses, I keep this part of the mission in mind and allow it to inform the main questions I ask, beginning with: How can I be in the classroom with this subject and with the students in an authentic manner?² How can I help my students be in the classroom with this subject with me and other students authentically?—how can I help them see more clearly and be more honest? What are the most important elements of this subject for the students simply to know? What are the most important questions related to this subject (that I can anticipate) for us to explore? What aspects of students' responsibility as citizens and as humans ought we to focus on? How do I arrange the syllabus so that students can bring their concerns into the classroom and, simultaneously, learn what sorts of questions are most helpful?

In response to my initial considerations of these questions, the first paragraph of the syllabus of Religion 232, The Buddhist Tradition, reads:

I make sure that first biography is of a woman. They become acquainted with a Thai Buddhist nun (māechī), Māechī Wabī. In learning about Māechī Wabī's world, they see how Buddhist concepts affect a person's life stories. They learn how differently Buddhists can conceive of their lives.



A young māechī. (Not Māechī Wabī.) Photo by Sid Brown.

Our major question in this course will be how a sensitive, intelligent, responsible person might live and conceive of his/her life as a Buddhist. Thus we will examine Buddhist history and philosophy carefully so that students fully understand the worlds in which Buddhists live. We will take the time to read a biography and an autobiography to get a closer view on how Buddhists live. By the end of the course students will know the major ideas and values of Buddhism and be able to describe and tell the significance of major figures, ideas, events, and movements within the tradition. Students will be able to discuss distinctively Buddhist understandings of human experiences.

Students have this paragraph, which we reread every once in a while and to which I refer often, as a touchstone. They understand that the course is designed to encourage them to know facts about history and philosophy, and that the course is designed to encourage them to develop their empathy for people who conceive of the world in very different terms than they do.

Holding the ideas of social justice and humane sensitivity in mind and responding to the bias in scholarship on Buddhism toward men, when I have my students read a biography (in short, to make friends with a Buddhist), I make sure that first biography is of a woman. They become acquainted with a Thai Buddhist nun (māechī), Māechī Wabī.³ In learning about Māechī

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By studying a biography of a Buddhist as we study Buddhist philosophy and history, my students understand issues related to social justice and religion.

Wabi's world, they see how Buddhist concepts affect a person's life stories. They learn how differently Buddhists can conceive of their lives. For example, Māechi Wabi had been a nun for some years when she had this experience:

I was [alternately] sitting and walking back and forth in meditation and suddenly I had the feeling of being a fish caught on a hook. The hook came and caught me in the side of my mouth, suspending me in pain—great pain. . . . It wasn't real, but the feeling was real, the pain was real, the suffering was real, but I think that this thing made me understand that it wasn't because of actions from past lives but because of actions in this life. When I was a child, I enjoyed fishing and bringing fish to my mom to cook and if there were any left over, I would exchange the fish with the villagers for rice.

"I was deeply impressed that even though I killed the fish in order to preserve the lives of my family, still that wrongdoing must for sure end up with some kind of karmic result."⁴

By this time in the course the students have a solid grasp of basic history and philosophy of Buddhism, yet they are always surprised by this passage—for a number of reasons. First, they are surprised that someone who has dedicated herself for some years to a religion would still be surprised by aspects of that religion. As is true for many who study religion and philosophy, the students tend to take the ideals and systematizations so seriously that they lose sight of how these ideals and systematizations are lived out.⁵ Related to this same tendency, they are surprised that a Buddhist would ever fish. Also, students are surprised by a person (who by that time they feel they know) having a vision and taking that vision seriously as a way to knowledge instead of, for example, ignoring the vision as a chemically-based aberration. Even though the students have studied and discussed aspects of meditation and visualization, seeing how these practices are lived out in this sort of example reinforces their learning in a different way. Finally, while they have studied Buddhist ethics and they have studied Buddhist meditation, this passage in the biography is the one that brings the two together graphically enough so that students begin to see the interrelatedness of meditation and ethics in the lives of those who meditate.

This interrelatedness is reinforced when they read about one of the most pivotal meditation experiences Māechi Wabi has, one that focuses on karmic interconnectedness and the moral responsibility that comes as a result of understanding that interconnectedness:

One time in meditation I found myself standing near and watching a woman with long, beautiful, flowing hair, wearing a loincloth passed between her legs and fastened at the back with a belt. . . .

It was hot and muggy and there was a man, a large man with black reddish skin, beating that woman.

. . . She screamed and moaned, but it was very strange—at the same time I was the person beating and the person receiving the blows, the person standing watching and the person sitting in meditation—all at the same time because I felt that my own body was the person beating, the person hurt, and the person in the situation and sitting in meditation.

Again, while the students understand karmic theory and have read about hell and its inhabitants, this kind of biographical focus allows them insights into how a Buddhist thinks and feels and lives that are new and fresh. They begin to see that not everyone is from a Protestant middle-class family from the midwest and that the implications of our differences in understanding the world are large indeed.

The students read the above passage knowing that at this time Māechi Wabi was facing some of her difficulties with another woman who lived in her nunnery, Māechi Mīna. This meditation experience was one of several that led Māechi Wabi to understand her own responsibilities in the failures of their relationship. For some years Māechi Wabi had viewed Māechi Mīna as small-minded, unhelpful, and mean. When Māechi Mīna was cruel to Māechi Wabi, Wabi dismissed the incidents as evidence of Māechi Mīna's bad karma. This understanding of another's karma was a good way to quickly dismiss Mīna's actions and avoid understanding them in a way that demanded that she take responsibility and that she develop compassion. In fact, Wabi effectively avoided conceiving of anything Mīna did as reflecting on or demanding anything of herself. Thus Mīna, who was sometimes, even frequently, acting in ways that a less obtuse person would see as reflecting pain that Wabi was causing, was brushed aside again and again as a person with bad karma. Through this vision and others, Wabi began to conceive the more helpful karmic relatedness of her and Mīna, and she began to see her own responsibility to pay attention to Mīna and to her relationship with Mīna. In this way students come to see how meditation can function in ethical decision making.

Martha Nussbaum describes how literature can contribute to ethical development: a person brings to a novel urgent concerns related to his/her life and then in a way puts those concerns to the side in order to concentrate on the novel. Similarly, a person comes to meditation with concerns and puts them aside in order to engage in meditation practice. Yet just as the concerns a person brings to a novel throw into relief certain characters and scenes and plot developments, bringing about certain reading experiences, so a meditator's concerns bring about certain kinds of

meditation experiences. By not gazing directly at our deepest personal concerns of the moment, we are able to place those concerns in larger contexts and allow them to reveal profound truths and ways of addressing problems.⁶

By studying a biography of a Buddhist as we study Buddhist philosophy and history, my students understand issues related to social justice and religion. The situation of most Thai women is a net of responsibilities: social and familial demands. A woman is expected to marry and become a mother. If she does not follow this standard path, she is expected to care for others. Thus little attention is given to cultivation of religiosity and skills unrelated to family. Meditation, however, enforces and gives meaning to solitude, deepens understanding of Buddhism and one's place in the world, and removes one from the tumult of emotions to gain perspective on emotions. Meditation allows emotions to inform without paralyzing, distracting, forcing a rushed or unhelpful response, and enforces a communality through characters and setting of meditation experiences. Women can share their meditation visions and understandings or not; there is still a community built on recognition of meditation as important and on recognizing the aspects of reality that can reveal themselves in meditation such as the reality of hell beings and the karmic interconnectedness of all beings.

By the final class session of Religion 232, my students have begun to see the world in its great variety, and the particulars of the life of their Buddhist friend, Māechi Wabi, have revealed the profound differences in how people can conceive of and live good lives. Each student has developed just a bit more of his or her "moral responsibility, social justice, humane sensitivity, and citizenship."

Other narratives (some fictional, some biographical) that may prove useful in teaching Asian religions include: Ruthanne Lum McCunn's *Wooden Fish Songs* (New York: Penguin Press, 1995) 3–8, 21–5, 275–9, 313–7, and Peter Ho Davies's "The Next Life" in *Equal Love: Stories* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2000) 35–48 for popular Chinese practices, symbols, and stories; Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* (Los Angeles: Self Realization Fellowship, 1981), Suzanne Fisher Staples's *Shiva's Fire* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2000), and Lisa Lassell Hallstrom's *Mother of Bliss: Ānandamayī Mā (1896–1982)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) for Hinduism; Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), and George Crane's *Bones of the Master* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 2000) for Buddhism. ■

NOTES

1. Simpson College's General Catalog 1999–2001, page 6.
2. While I mostly teach subjects in which I have a vast amount of knowledge and experience, my position at a small college also means that I cover a broad territory; I am sometimes called upon to teach subjects about which I have considerably less knowledge. This question becomes most central when I teach these subjects.

3. The Theravada Buddhist nun lineage died out some centuries ago, but in Thailand approximately 10,000 Theravada Buddhist women live in ways that parallel those of nuns. These women, who dress in white and usually take eight precepts, living in monasteries or nunneries, are called *māechī*. The term *māechī* is also an honorific.
4. All quotations referring to Māechi Wabi's life are from my *The Journey of One Buddhist Nun: Even Against the Wind* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, in press). Pseudonyms are used in this article for the Māechi discussed.
5. After living in various Buddhist countries, I went to graduate school and found the same phenomenon there. I remember a fellow graduate student commenting that he had to suppose Buddhists were the nicest people in the world, judging from their texts. Would that we all lived up to the ideals of our texts.
6. Martha Nussbaum, "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy," *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, 148–67 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

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