

## Mitchell, Scott

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### **GENERATIONS OF BUDDHIST STUDIES**

**Scott Mitchell**

At the risk of being a contrarian, I am not entirely sure that what follows will be of any use or interest to anyone, either in or outside of Buddhist Studies. The details of my life are not particularly interesting, let alone relevant, to my formation as a scholar (it's all random causes and conditions and who's to say what parts of that web of causality lead me to one path or another). And what has been most formative is the type of stories I would not commit to paper, the type of stories told over a stiff drink after hours at AAR. In short, the type of stories I hope will die with me.

Nevertheless, what might be of interest to the reader is the simple fact that I am not supposed to be here, that my position as a scholar is, in some very real ways, a colossal mistake. And yet, here I am. So I suppose an accounting of how this came to pass is worth sharing.

My brother and I were raised by a single mother who, in turn, was raised by a single mother. Our small extended family consisted of the maternal grandmother/matriarch (and, eventually, her last husband), her three children, their spouses, my brother, and our three cousins. Of that motley crew, a distinct minority of us ever finished college, and even though many of them gestured toward a vague affinity with Christianity, I never went to church. Thus, in sum, I grew up poor, without religion, and not in an "academic family."

However, the following things set me on the "straight and narrow" to graduate school. First, my mother is an artist. Though her formal career as an oil painter took several backseats while she raised my brother and me, she never lost that sense of self and filled our home with both original art and art catalogs. This afforded me the opportunity to leaf through encyclopedic books on the history of Western art — from French cave paintings to Picasso — and thus to high culture. Second, my mother was one of the few (the proud, the brave) who had finished college, and so the idea that I would *not* go to college never occurred to me, even if I didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up. These two facts pointed to other possibilities, other worlds I could explore outside the limiting confines of my upbringing in the suburban wastelands of Los Angeles. Third, and finally, in response to an overzealous Evangelical Christian babysitter who was appalled that we were never

properly baptized, my mother instilled in me, from the very young age of six or seven, a healthy skepticism of religion and the strong tendency toward criticism and critical inquiry. Needless to say, by the time I was in high school, I was one of those insufferable pseudo-intellectuals who wrote terrible, melodramatic poetry and fancied himself an *artiste*; in short, someone you'd be embarrassed to bring home to meet your parents. (You'll be happy to know I never owned a beret.)

College was a disaster. In addition to being a pseudo-intellectual (bad enough), I had no clear idea of what I wanted to be when I grew up, changed majors often, and even changed colleges a few times before, eventually, enrolling in the Philosophy and Religion program at San Francisco State University. (Full disclosure: I moved to San Francisco for a girl, not for the school. She subsequently left me.)

At the same time, my pseudo-intellectualism had begun to direct me toward Buddhism since taking a course on the history of the Vietnam War my first semester in college. Part of the "historical and cultural background" of the course included a brief discussion of Buddhism (very basic stuff, the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path), and this discussion was of deep interest to me personally. Coming from a non-religious and deeply skeptical background, Buddhism seemed inherently rational and common-sense to me. And so by the time I moved to San Francisco, I had begun exploring the extraordinarily diverse local Buddhist scene, not for academic but for personal reasons.

(Fun fact: when I wanted to find the San Francisco Zen Center, I looked it up in the phone book — yes, the phone book — and found a listing in Japantown. Needless to say, my first experience with San Francisco Zen was at Sokoji, the Soto Mission of San Francisco, the very temple Shunryū Suzuki left when he struck out on his own to establish the Zen Center.)

My personal interest in Buddhism collided with my academic interest at SF State in two distinct ways. First, the Buddhist Studies professor at the time was Dr. Ron Epstein who also worked for the Buddhist Text Translation Society, a project out of the Dharma Realm Buddhist Association. Even though my advisor at the time was Jacob Needleman, he was on sabbatical for most of my tenure at State, so Dr. Epstein became my *de facto* advisor. Thus, my first formal education in Buddhist Studies came through a man who was both committed to the academic study of Buddhism and committed to the practice of Buddhism. I was not, at the time, aware of the contested nature of this kind of dual affiliation. (I was also not aware of the idiosyncratic nature of my education at the time.) But it perhaps goes without saying

that this position between two worlds has influenced my thinking on Buddhism and Buddhist Studies ever since.

Second, there was a time that I did martial arts — specifically Tai Chi and Shaolin, taught by an amazing, strong, and tiny woman at SF State (who also taught students very early on weekend mornings in Chinatown on the pedestrian bridge crossing Kearny connecting Portsmouth Square to the Hilton). In her advanced martial arts class, she took her students on a tour of the “real Chinatown” which included a stop at Gold Mountain Monastery. I have a very clear memory of sitting in large hall at the monastery, packed full of people, the air thick with incense, listening to a dharma talk that was delivered, simultaneously, in Mandarin, Cantonese, and English. It probably also goes without saying that my interest in the lived experience of Buddhism, in the messy way that people practice across traditions, across boundaries, is also traceable to these moments back in the day in San Francisco.

Despite the decidedly Chinese influences on my Buddhist education at the time, I was more drawn to Japan. I began learning Japanese at SF State, and was more interested in Zen than Chan. Nothing ever really “clicked” for me; I can’t say that I committed to any particular practice or community while living in San Francisco, despite my extensive “shopping around.”

Upon graduation, as what came as no surprise to anyone, I still didn’t know what I wanted to be when I grew up. So I did what any red-blooded American with a philosophy degree would do — I spent the summer back-packing across Europe. Upon my return to the States, I got a job in a warehouse in Oakland, boxing up books to be shipped to local bookstores (shortly before Amazon ruined everything). While standing on the line one day, a thought passed through my mind — *I want to be a teacher. I want to teach religious studies at a college or a university.* I honestly did not know what that meant, but I knew enough to know that I needed to go to grad school.

And now, at last, we come to one of the crucial mistakes of my path toward academe. In preparing grad school applications, I visited Dr. Epstein to both get advice and a letter of recommendation. He asked where I was applying, I told him my list, he explicitly forbade me from applying to one school on my list, and then said, “Have you considered the Graduate Theological Union?”

What he didn’t say was that as a member of the Dharma Realm Buddhist Association, Dr. Epstein was friend and colleague of Rev. Heng Sure, then a doctoral

student at the GTU and abbot of the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery which had a loose affiliation with the non-denominational seminary, Pacific School of Religion, a founding member school of the GTU. Based on an extraordinarily awkward conversation at a conference several years later, it became clear to me that Dr. Epstein had hoped that I would attend PSR, study with the Rev. Heng Sure, and continue on in their lineage. I did not. I went home from our meeting that day, hopped on my roommate's computer (the one connected to this new thing called the World Wide Web), and did a search for "Buddhist Studies" and "Graduate Theological Union" and was directed to the website for the Institute of Buddhist Studies, an affiliate member of the GTU since 1985. The IBS is most certainly not part of the Dharma Realm Buddhist Association; it is a small graduate school founded in the 1960s to support, in part, the education of priests in the Japanese Pure Land sect, Jōdo Shinshū. These facts were all unknown to me at the time; like I said, all I knew was that I wanted to teach, and that meant I needed to go to grad school.

So, in addition to many other applications, I sent one off to the GTU/IBS on the assumption that I would pursue a scholarly career in inter-religious studies or Buddhist-Christian dialogue. This made sense at the time since my senior project at SF State had been on that topic, and so the inter-religious nature of GTU seemed like a natural fit. That plan didn't really work out, but we'll come back to that.

At the time, the IBS was going through some difficult days; following the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, the IBS building in Berkeley was declared seismically unsound. Administrative offices were moved off-site, and classes were held, if not at random classrooms across the GTU, in the common room at the IBS dorm just south of UC Berkeley. Student enrollment dropped as a result, meaning I was one of about three students at IBS at the time. I can't complain, though, because this provided us with an intimacy and closeness I don't think one would experience in a larger program. We all knew each other, we were all friends and colleagues, and we all supported each other's work, even and especially when it diverged from our own.

Despite several horribly disastrous personal decisions I made during my time as a Master's student at GTU/IBS, none of which had anything to do with my academic study, I loved my time in the program. I spent a large amount of time studying Japanese, talking baseball, and watching *anime* with fellow students and good friends, Kanjo Asuka and Harry Bridge. I had the opportunity to study with Rev. Dr. David Matsumoto, Hank Glassman, Eisho Nasu, Taigen Daniel Leighton, Haruyoshi

Kusada, Martin VerHooven, and, of course, Richard Payne, as well as many others who shaped my thinking and appreciation of Buddhist Studies and Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism. My thesis was overseen by Drs. Payne, Nasu, and VerHooven — and though I can't say that work has any lasting importance — it was a study of internet Buddhism written in 2001-2002, in the midst of the dot-com crash and before the ascendancy of Web 2.0, social media, Facebook, fake news, etc., etc., etc. — I can say that it deeply informed how I think about religion, about religious community, and, most importantly, about how to ask the right kinds of questions. Hands down, this is the most important thing I learned from Richard Payne — questions matter.

Mid-way through the M.A. program, it became apparent that I needed to get my Ph.D. Whereas I applied to other programs, it was never really in doubt that I'd continue working with Richard Payne. By this time, I had long abandoned my interest in Buddhist-Christian dialogue. I have a particularly terrible class in inter-religious studies and Martin VerHooven to thank for my turn away from comparative studies and to the study of Buddhism in the United States. I'll save the terrible class for another time, and here I'll simply say that Dr. VerHooven's class, "East Meets West" was a revelation to me. Prior to that class, while I was obviously aware of the existence of Buddhism in America, I was not aware of its long history. Learning this history while a student at IBS — an institution established by an American Buddhist community that traces its roots to the nineteenth century — was particularly relevant. As time went on, I was increasingly interested in both the contemporary practice of American Shin Buddhism and the history of this community, its triumphs, trials, highs and lows through World War II incarceration and into the twenty-first century. Thus, history has been a primary lens through which I study American Buddhism.

For my dissertation, though, I was also interested in how Buddhism is *practiced*. I struck upon the idea of investigating dharma talks — not the content of them, but how they are *performed*. What was particularly interesting to me was that dharma talks are performed in a wide range of Buddhist traditions, and so I struck out to do comparative fieldwork. I was particularly interested in how this practice is ritualized in different *saṅghas* and different services, especially given the extent to which American Buddhists are described as disinterested in ritual. I wanted to play with these academic approaches, call them into question, critique their assumptions — in short, live up to the ideals of my inner pseudo-intellectual.

Richard Payne, Judith Berling, and Duncan Ryūken Williams oversaw my doctoral

work. I cannot say enough about how they influenced my thinking. Judith for her attentiveness to my communities of accountability and for pushing me to be more forthright and bold in my assertions. Duncan for pressing me to be ever attentive to the communities I was studying, especially those of Japanese descent, as well as their complex political relations with American cultural at large. And Richard — for everything.

I have known Richard for twenty years now. In that time, he has served as my graduate advisor, as my mentor, as my dean, and as my fellow faculty member. It is hard for me to separate these roles, but through all of these, I have come to rely on his expertise, his experience, his wisdom, his wit, and his compassionate commitment both to the study of Buddhism and to the Institute of Buddhist Studies. Richard is a brilliant scholar, an adept administrator, and reluctant politician who steered the oft-times rudderless IBS ship through difficult waters. All of this knowledge has been passed to me as his student, as his “replacement” (though no one could replace him in fullness) as dean — and so it is difficult to parse out what I’ve learned from him as scholar from what I’ve learned as friend and colleague. The only appropriate response, of course, is gratitude.<sup>[1]</sup>

I said earlier that college was a disaster. I wouldn’t say grad school was a disaster, but I would say that I don’t think I took things as seriously as I should have till toward the end, which is to say that I feel I missed out on several “professional development” opportunities. I probably should have attended more conferences. I probably should have tried to publish more. Ah well. If we spend our lives dwelling on what should have been, what will we accomplish? I say this now to suggest that I feel like something of a “late bloomer” in Buddhist Studies. It wasn’t until I was in the process of defending my dissertation and the immediate few years post-graduation that my career really started to crystallize.

In particular, around the time I was writing on my dissertation, I befriended Daniel Friedrich who was finishing his M.A. at GTU/IBS and would go on to pursue his doctorate at McMaster University. Through Daniel, as well as my connections to the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies (IASBS), I was able to develop working relationships and friendships both with Japanese scholars and scholars working on Japanese Buddhism. I often feel like a dilettante in their midst, but I am also sure that in some parallel universe, I became a Japan scholar instead of an Americanist. These connections and conversations have been some of the most rewarding for me, including those with Mark Blum, Michael Conway, Melissa Anne-

Marie Curley, Mitsuya Dake, James Dobbins, Orion Kalutau, Jessica Main, Levi McLaughlin, Jessica Starling, Kenneth Tanaka, and many more. In 2013, I successfully applied to have the IASBS listed as a related scholarly organization with the ARR, which allows us to host meetings in conjunction with the annual AAR meeting. And overwhelmingly, these meetings have featured Japan scholars. I feel extremely grateful to be in such good company, even if my work generally falls on this side of the Pacific.

But really, I owe everything I am now to Natalie Quli. Natalie and I were both in the GTU doctoral program, though I was a year or two ahead of her. As I was finishing my dissertation, she was working with Richard Payne on the IBS's journal, *Pacific World* (as well as many other editorial projects). On some random afternoon when she and I happened to be in Berkeley at the same time (this would be around 2008), we struck up a conversation about Charles Prebish and Kenneth Tanaka's *The Faces of Buddhism in America*. We reflected on the fact that that volume was the result of a series of public lectures held at the IBS in the 1990s and that, since then, no one had followed up on that. Well, we thought, let's host a conference.

It's a testament to our youthful naiveté that we decided to just "host a conference" without realizing how difficult that would be. Nevertheless, we did it. We invited a bevy of established scholars — Charles Prebish, Richard Seager, Duncan Williams, among others — as well as scholars who, at the time, were just coming on to the scene — Michihiro Ama, Jeff Wilson, Wakoh Shannon Hickey — and put out an open call for papers which attracted other emerging scholars — David McMahan, Erik Braun, Daniel Veidlinger. And we invited Thomas Tweed, who had just published his theory of religion, *Crossing and Dwelling*, to give the keynote. What was supposed to be a day-and-a-half event quickly ballooned into a three-day affair. We were overwhelmed and extremely grateful that the Institute of Buddhist Studies, which had only just moved into the recently opened Jodo Shinshu Center in Berkeley, put up with our crazy plan.

The crazy plan worked. By all accounts, the conference, held one weekend in March 2010, was a success. Dozens of papers were presented, people wanted us to host an event every year, and, in some sense, it put us and IBS "on the map." Immediately following, Natalie and I sat down to hash out an edited volume based on the conference, a book that would eventually become *Buddhism Beyond Borders* (SUNY 2015), the start of a long and very productive working relationship.

Indeed, as much as Richard Payne has influenced my thinking on Buddhism, my

ongoing relationship — reflected in professional projects as well as impromptu conversations — with Natalie Quli has shaped who I am as a scholar in ways I cannot even begin to articulate. Deep gratitude does not begin to describe what I owe to her and our friendship.

A word should be said about my dissertation. Circumstances were such that around the same day I was defending the work, a half dozen other things came on the field that would have impact on my own study. I rushed a revised version of it to one press, was rejected, tried again, and failed again. I took this a sign to step back, take stock, and figure a way forward. I had collected a fair amount of field work that I felt was of value in some form; and I wanted to push forward with related work I had done on North American Buddhist music. For several years, that was my focus. I published a couple of articles on the topic, and presented my work at least a half dozen times at different conferences and other events. Eventually, I felt I had enough data to start thinking about a monograph. Unfortunately, it became clear to me that I actually had two different book ideas in my head. The book I could write, the one that had the most data to support an argument, wasn't one that was particularly interesting to me. The one I wanted to write, I didn't have enough data to support the argument, the question, that really consumed me; but to get that data, I would need a hoard of grad students and a large grant.

As I was pondering what to do, I was invited by Lalle Pursglove, an editor with Bloomsbury Press, to consider a book on American Buddhism. I was hesitant — the topic is too broad, it's been done — but the idea burrowed into my brain, wouldn't let go, and I took on the project. The next three years were spent researching, returning to my own scholarship, doing my best to learn everything I could about corners of the American Buddhist scene I hadn't visited in many years or had never heard of before. The result was the publication, in 2016, of *Buddhism in America: Global Religion, Local Contexts*, a work I am proud of and one that I hope is of value to the field but especially to my colleagues teaching undergraduate courses in Buddhism.

By the time of the Buddhism in America conference back in 2010, I was married, a child on the way, holding Ph.D. in an incredibly competitive market with ridiculously limited job opportunities, and, essentially, adjunct teaching at the school that awarded me my master's degree. While I was weighing different options, the conference endeared me to the Institute. It opened the door to possibilities I hadn't considered, and, given the dismal job market at the time and my desire to stay in the

Bay Area, seemed ideal. Over the course of 2010 to 2013, my faculty responsibilities at IBS grew. When Richard confided in me that he wanted to step down as Dean and that I might be his successor, I saw that as a profound opportunity to make my mark on American Buddhist education.

So, I suppose a word should also be said here about my position at, and indeed the nature of the educational program of, the Institute of Buddhist Studies. IBS is a “seminary and graduate school.” On the “seminary” side of things, we provide educational programs for students pursuing careers in ministry (specifically but not limited to Jōdo Shinshū) and Buddhist chaplaincy. This is surely on the “practitioner” side of the “scholar-practitioner” equation. But we also have programs in support of those students who want to pursue careers in traditionally defined Buddhist Studies — and we’ve had students go on to get doctorates from major centers of Buddhist Studies: McMaster, SOAS, University of Southern California, Michigan, and so forth — not to mention the Graduate Theological Union. The fact that we have students with “career objectives” in both these fields compels us to be attentive to the strict standards of secular academic Buddhist Studies and empathetic to the needs of Buddhist practitioners. Suffice to say, I believe that we happily inhabit the hyphen between “scholar-practitioner,” drawing from both traditions as appropriate. Neither is valued more than the other; they are mutually supportive.

I feel profoundly grateful that I have found my way to this community, even if by accident. As I’ve said, it is a mistake that I am an academic. If autobiography is intended to do anything, it is to explain the circumstances that shape an individual’s life. There is nothing in my life that suggests that I should be an academic. (My brother, who had the same upbringing as me, is a software engineer.) My location as Dean of an oddly constituted Buddhist seminary and graduate school is an accident. But, then again, if there is one thing I’ve learned from nearly three decades of academic and personal study of Buddhism it is this — most things happen by accident, that is by the immutable and unfathomable law of karma, causes and conditions, and the only appropriate response is gratitude.

And so I am grateful to my teachers and my incredibly lucky lot in life to be able to get paid doing what I love.

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[1] A version of this paragraph appears in the “Introduction” to *Methods in Buddhist Studies*, co-edited with Natalie Fisk Quli, Bloomsbury Press, 2019.