Gorant on Brasovan, 'Buddhisms in Asia: Traditions, Transmissions, and Transformations'

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Gorant on Brasovan, *Buddhisms in Asia: Traditions, Transmissions, and Transformations*

In *Buddhisms in Asia: Traditions, Transmissions, and Transformations*, the authors present diverse approaches to teaching Buddhism(s) as a set of living traditions in the undergraduate classroom. With a shared interest in moving beyond a defining text or history as a common introduction for students new to the study of Buddhist traditions, the authors engage with multiplicity through case studies of well-researched lesson plans that often include reflections on their own tested experiences. The book’s offering of practical examples that showcase pedagogies and include clear discussion questions for students, acts as a blueprint for instructors seeking to transform their own lessons on Buddhist traditions in the humanities classroom for different courses. It addresses head-on the problem of teaching introductory Buddhism as merely a distilled set of philosophical principles (i.e., the Four Noble Truths), challenging this with an articulation of facets of complex living traditions.

One major theme that resonates throughout the essays is the book’s divergence from introducing Buddhism as a singularly philosophical and rational tradition. Peter Hershock begins his foreword with the notion that Buddhist traditions do not have a revelatory text or defining creed and then considers the problems that arise from teaching the religious tradition in a humanities survey as rooted in statements such as “everything is suffering.” Editors Micheline Soong and Nicholas Brasovan next introduce the essays of the book, articulating the collective intention to explore introductory lessons on Buddhism as a set of pluralistic traditions with essays that demonstrate strengths from different disciplinary focuses.

In the first essay, Andy Alexander Davis considers primary bibliographic texts as generative for discussion in specific ways, namely the quantity and length of texts, orality, sacred value as shifting, self-awareness of authenticity, and elitism that arises upon reading Buddhist traditions through textual canons. The study questions that follow each chapter distill experience teaching in the
classroom into a practical guide to major questions that arise from each text, such as whether mindfulness in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (Mindfulness Sutta) can be described in words, or the relationship between logic and ethics in Nāgārjuna’s *Middle Way*. Ann Pirruccello proposes reading literary sources on *gongan*, or recorded sayings or anecdotes from Ch’an patriarchs, in Chan Buddhism to help students understand key terms. While students may at first imagine transcendence as something beyond human experience, comparing uses of the term *dao* as defined in relation to Buddha-nature in this period, for instance, elucidates their meanings. Kendall Marchman opens his essay on teaching Pure Land Buddhism with the double-edged sword of exoticism that often arises on the first day in the liberal arts classroom—which often manifests as fascination with the Other and the assumption of a deeply philosophical Buddhism—that can be used fruitfully to consider, for instance, why Pure Land has been marginalized in the study of Buddhist traditions in past decades, and how the basis of vow to Amitābha raises issues about assumptions of Buddhism as a singularly merit-based tradition. From nāgas (semi-divine cobra beings in South Asia) to dragon kings, Jacqueline Chao’s essay traces the visual and mythological role of these transmitted figures from ancient Buddhist imaginaries through Chinese travelogues recounting dragons at Lumbini and beyond, articulating the role of *long* in Chinese Buddhist, Daoist, and folk religion. Questions for comparison such as presentations of the dragon in calligraphy and nāga in stone as well as views from disparate historical periods are distinct from lessons on the Four Noble Truths as central to all traditions of Buddhism. A world apart from the idea of a free-floating Buddhism critiqued at the start of the essay, R. Keller Kimbrough traces stories from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Japanese illustrated tales recounting filial piety in *Amida’s Riven Breast* and the *Tale of Tameyo*, providing questions for students that query the role of horror and complicate what it means to take them as Buddhist stories.

Jessica Falcone and Geoff Ashton examine social practice as a defining feature as divergent from typical textbook introductory lessons to Buddhist traditions. With analysis of transcultural gift theories, Falcone asserts discussion of comparative transcultural models of gift theory probing paired with case studies of *dāna* as a tactic for introducing Theravada Buddhism. Ashton aims to redefine Buddhist ethics beyond limitations of a Western humanities classroom, looking to Buddhāśa to consider the puzzle of emptiness of the self with proactive social engagement that arises from a lens of virtue ethics. Wynn Gadkar-Wilcox situates Vietnam within a historical past that is radically different from other Buddhism, identifying how its social amalgamation of Khmer, Cham, Chinese, and local traditions make it distinctive as a case for studying Vietnamese Buddhism with its own five clear themes. Jane Collins offers resources to teach English literature with themes of suffering, karma, compassion, Buddha-nature, and emptiness altogether. Acknowledging the beginner’s mind full of possibilities as akin to the not knowing as a theme of Buddhist mindfulness teachings, the final essay provides the opportunity consider that perhaps commonly taught doctrines need not be disregarded but reassessed.

*Buddhisms in Asia* is both practical and thought-provoking in its comparison of pedagogies. The strength of the book is that it brings multiple authors together for a candid discussion of what needs to be changed within introductory material in the liberal arts classroom. The essays are pertinent for instructors asked to teach Buddhism in a survey of world religions. It provides a concrete approach to tackling decontextualized and ahistorical paradigms still in circulation in the study of Buddhist traditions, for nonspecialists and instructors seeking to revitalize their curriculum.