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A Tibetan Buddhist Ideal — Integrating Scholarly Learning with Spiritual Practice

What can Tibetan Buddhist formation of monastic scholars teach Western theological educators about the integration of spiritual disciplines with theological learning? I was requested to respond to that question as a Buddhist theologian who teaches Buddhism and comparative theology in a Catholic university (Boston College) while also teaching Buddhist thought and practice within Buddhist practice communities

The integration of study with spiritual practice has been a central ideal of Tibetan monastic institutions from the twelfth century to the present day. The proper integration of study and practice is seen as essential not only to support the spiritual transformation of individuals but also to apply Buddhist knowledge beneficially to deep-felt needs of Asian Buddhist societies.

Tibetan monks study a diverse collection of Indian and Tibetan Buddhist texts that analyze the causal structure of psychophysical reality, cognitive, and affective mental states that can obstruct or support awakening to enlightenment, Buddhist cosmologies, meditation techniques and stages, connections between conceptual and nonconceptual modes of spiritual practice (including analogues of kataphatic and apophatic practice), qualities and powers of enlightened awareness, the social, ethical and ritual disciplines involved in the awakening of persons, and the application of enlightened knowledge and ritual-yogic power to the concerns of Buddhist cultures. Extensive memorization of core texts, debate, and at various periods in a scholar's life, retreat for ritual and meditational practice, all play a part in the learning process.

Three mutually informing aspects of learning are involved in the understanding and appropriation of each Buddhist topic: 1) Receiving oral transmission of the texts, hearing and studying extensive commentary upon them, which leads to the "wisdom that arises from hearing;" 2) Rigorously investigating the teaching, conceptually reflecting on it in relation to one's experience, which leads to the "wisdom that arises from thinking;" and 3) Appropriating and embodying the teaching in direct experience through the power of meditation, called "wisdom that arises from meditation." The guiding principle is that further understanding informs further levels of spiritual practice experience that empower further understanding — including both intellectual and nonconceptual modes of understanding. This learning framework is ubiquitous in Tibetan monastic institutions, inherited from scholastic Indian Buddhist tradition, broadly analogous to the "faith seeking understanding" paradigm of Christian theology.

The curricular connection between study and practice mirrors ways that doctrines and spiritual disciplines have developed together throughout Buddhist history. Shifts in doctrinal understanding have accompanied shifts in form or emphasis of Buddhist practices. Ritual, yogic, philosophical, ethical, and visionary practice disciplines have informed and been informed by doctrines of emptiness, karma, dependent arising, Buddha nature, bodhisattva vow, compassion and wisdom, subtle body, mandala, and pure realm. Such doctrines and practices feed into Tibetan Buddhism's central paradigm of the non-duality of samsara and nirvana, appearance and emptiness, ordinary experience and primordial purity.

Buddhist-based Exercises with Western Students for Integrating Study and Practice

When I teach courses on Buddhism in Boston College, a Catholic university, I try to show many connections between doctrine and practice not just to help students understand Buddhist traditions but also to point them toward analogous integrations of thought and spiritual practice in Christian traditions, and perhaps in their own lives. When Indian and Central Asian Buddhism first began to take root in China in the early centuries CE, most Chinese did not become formally Buddhist, but many took an interest in Buddhist resources to help them reexamine what

it means to be a Chinese person, which they understood in broadly Confucian terms. I sense a similar historical moment now in the Western academy — many Christians, Jews, and others are seeking in Buddhism the means to reintroduce themselves to their own spiritual lives and traditions in light of the Buddhist emphasis on connecting philosophical reflection to spiritual discipline.

Pedagogically, I try to help students discern connections between doctrine and practice in three ways: 1) Through lectures and readings that point out relations between Buddhist doctrines and spiritual practices, including ritual, ethical, meditational, psychological and analytical practices; 2) Through studying various manuals of Buddhist practice to see how doctrines are integrated into each element of spiritual discipline; and 3) Through class exercises, adapted from philosophical and meditative traditions of Buddhism, to provide some experiential light on connections between thought and practice.

Regarding the third point, for example, I use a class exercise to help students see connections between the Buddhist analysis of the person into “five aggregates,” many other basic Buddhist doctrines, and the meditation practice of mindfulness. In the classic Buddhist analysis, the person’s whole field of experience is divided into five sets of psycho-physical factors: forms, sense consciousnesses, feeling tones, perceptions, and thought formations — called the “five aggregates.” Unless this five-fold perspective on persons is well engaged, students cannot properly understand the Buddha’s first two noble truths, of suffering (*duhkha*) and the inner causes of suffering. Nor can they understand the import of doctrines of impermanence, not-self, dependent arising, path (*marga*) and liberation (*nirvana*), nor how those doctrines are related to the systematic philosophies and soteriologies of diverse Buddhist traditions. Yet this five aggregate analysis makes little sense to students if it is not seen in its traditional connection to the practice of mindfulness meditation. Therefore, in class I introduce simple mindfulness practices to help students identify each psycho-physical aggregate in their own direct experience. From this, they can better see how the aggregates are related to the Buddhist topics above, understanding personal suffering to be generated by the interrelated arising of the five aggregates as the mind attempts to construct a stable sense of self and world out of the shifting data of experience. Indeed, without a mindfulness exercise to identify all five of these aggregates, students by default engage only the *fifth* aggregate — thought formations. That is, they only think *about* the aggregates rather than identifying each directly within the actual elements of their own experience.

I introduce another experiential exercise to inform our study of the Madhyamaka teaching of Nagarjuna (second century CE), one of the fathers of Indian Buddhist philosophy. In his famous treatise, the *Mulamadhyamakakarikas*, Nagarjuna’s chapter on motion uses arguments to attack the ordinary understanding and experience of motion as real, so as to show the emptiness, the conceptually constructed nature, of our experience of time and space. Students

gain a better appreciation of the import of his arguments when I lead them through “motion” exercises structured by Nagarjuna’s arguments. For example, I ask students slowly to wave one of their hands continuously back and forth in front of themselves. As they repeat the motion, I say, “Now, when the hand comes to the middle of the motion, stop.” With their hands stopped at that point, I ask, echoing Nagarjuna, “*How is this the*

‘middle’? Middle of

what

?” With the hand simply present at any point in space and time, with no “beginning” or “end” now being conceptualized, “middle” has no meaning. The “beginning,” “middle” and “end” that comprise a motion are revealed to be

empty

of independent existence;

only

existing as interdependent conceptual constructs. In this way, students begin experientially to engage Nagarjuna’s point that our usual way of experiencing presuppose subconsciously generated frameworks of time, space, subject, and object that do not appear to us as conceptual constructs. From this, students can better appreciate some of the ethical and soteriological implications that Buddhist philosophers draw from Madhyamaka philosophy — that persons continually mistake their own limited concepts of self, others, and world for the realities, thereby mis-reacting to them through ingrained cognitive habits instead of being fully present to them.

A Theological Course with a Buddhist Paradigm of Integrating Study and Practice

The focus of this essay has been the integration of study and practice paradigmatic to Tibetan traditions of learning. Another way I try to help students experience the power of that paradigm is through a new course I introduced at Boston College called “Meditation, Service, and Social Action.” I offer the course to students in the graduate schools of theology, ministry, social work, and education and to undergraduate seniors who have community service experience. Based on readings in meditation theory, supported by meditation instruction in class and the students’ daily practice of it, students explore Buddhist understandings of awareness and its capacities for calm attention, impartial compassion, and fuller presence to self and others. The meditations have been thoroughly adapted from Tibetan traditions for people of all backgrounds and faiths. Their purpose is to give students knowledge of Buddhist contemplative methods, to see what comparative light they shed on students’ own spiritual traditions and formation, and to explore how the students’ developing contemplative experience may inform their understanding of service to others, social ethics, and social action. Each week students also read passages on contemplative service themes by faith based social activists — including Martin Luther King Jr., Mohandas Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Henri Nouwen, Thomas Merton, Maya Angelou, Paul Knitter, Parker Palmer, Desmond Tutu, Thich Nhat Hanh, Aung San Suu Kyi, the Dalai Lama, and others. Students write weekly on ways that their reading informs their meditation practice, their meditation practice informs their reading, and how both inform their understanding of social ethics, service, and social action. By engaging contemplative practices from Buddhist traditions

so rigorously, this course also becomes a deep interreligious learning and exercise in applied comparative theology. By thus adapting the Buddhist paradigm of integrating study with practice, I encourage students to explore their own individual ways of replicating that paradigm within their own spiritual formation and process of reflection.

Christian theology students in my classes on Buddhism often find themselves looking back into the history of Christianity to explore analogous integrations of doctrinal learning and practice to further inform their own theological process. For example, various of my graduate Christian theology students have looked anew into writings of Origen, Athanasius, Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus, Aquinas, Bonaventure, Nicholas of Cusa, Ignatius, and such modern figures as Rahner, Lonergan, Moltmann, Gutierrez, Schussler-Fiorenza, Ruether, Coakley, and others. This approach also encourages Christian and Jewish theology students to give new consideration to ways that the spiritual disciplines that have been part of their own spiritual formation, such as prayer, worship, sacrament, and faith-based social service might come into further conscious relation to their theological studies.

Resources

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