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Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 9 May 2019

Buddhism in the Critical Classroom



Podcast with **Matthew Hayes** (13 May 2019).

Interviewed by **David G. Robertson**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/buddhism-in-the-critical-classroom>

David Robertson (DR): *Well, I'm pleased to be speaking today to [Matthew Hayes](#), who is a research student at UCLA – that's the University of California and Los Angeles. Welcome to the RSP, Matthew!*

Matthew Hayes (MH): David, thank you very much. I'm very happy to be speaking with you. I appreciate it.

DR: *You're very welcome. You got in contact with what I think is a really interesting topic – something very RSP, combining our love of pedagogy and critical theory. And you wanted to talk about critical pedagogy in teaching non-Western religions. Maybe we could kick off with just a little bit of context as to who you are, and what you do? And maybe then we can get into talking about the course, and the specific kind-of exercises and stuff that you do?*

MH: Sure. Yes, so my [research](#) kind-of broadly is centred on Buddhist ritual practice during the early modern period in Japan, which runs from 1603-1868. And I'm interested, really, in issues of ritual knowledge production and transmission and the formation and sort-of dissolution, also, of social groups in this context. I focus on a genre of devotional literature called *Kōshiki*. And my dissertation actually takes a look – a fairly narrow look – at one specific *Kōshiki* written by a medieval monk named Kakuban. And the research really traces later performative editorial and even pedagogical iterations of this *Kōshiki*, and really argues that these iterations served as vectors for the transmission of religious knowledge at a specific temple called Chishakuin, in Kyoto, during the seventeenth century or late seventeenth century. So my research is really a kind-of mix, I suppose, of kind-of an institutional study, it's a textual study, it's a social study, it's a ritual study. So it's a kind-of hybrid project in that way.

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DR: *Yes, it's quite a good technique, I think, actually doing that sort of critical reading of text. It could be very enlightening from a critical point of view, as to the way that texts are interpreted and the way – in relation to their context over time of course . . .*

MH: Absolutely. I think it's fairly common to take ritual performance as a performance. So I'm trying to tread a thin line between performance and a textual study: sort-of what happens when we look at a ritual text as a text? Because, in a lot of ways, not only the ritual text but actually commentarial literature surrounding this text was taken up as a kind-of textual study by monks themselves. So it sort-of straddles a thin line between performance and a more cognitive study of a text.

DR: *Cool. Now the question always come down to, in the classroom, how do we start? And you had quite an interesting exercise that you started with.*

MH: Right, yes. So I teach fairly regularly here at UCLA. I teach an introduction to Buddhism course, which is, you know, a broad survey course, usually fairly highly enrolled: anywhere between sixty and a hundred students. It's a GE course, which means students are required to take it to graduate. So there's a fairly heavy writing component to this course. One of the kind-of early assignments that I give students is a . . . it's almost a throw away assignment, right? It's way to gauge base-level writing skills. It's very low-stakes, it's not worth very much compared to later research projects. But what it really does, I think – for me anyway – is it unearths a lot of assumptions about Buddhism as a religion in the minds of students. So the assignment actually asks students to take a stance, without any prior knowledge of the tradition – this is day one of the course, essentially, week one – and make an argument for Buddhism as either a religion or a philosophy. Right? So this is kind-of a foil for me . . . or kind-of a straw man, to set up assumptions and kind-of pre-existing knowledge, if any, about the tradition, which is either refined or displaced over the weeks as the course goes on. And so that's essentially the assignment (5:00). It allows students to kind-of express whatever they can, if they can about Buddhism as a kind of template of sorts that will be reworked and reformed as the course goes on, in their writing.

DR: *Yes. It's an interesting . . . I have done similar ones. But I never done that exercise focussed specifically on Buddhism. The fact that you do is interesting. Because I think you would get different answers depending on which tradition you were asking, I think.*

MH: Right. Absolutely. So that's the other kind-of component. And it's meant to be broad, right? It's meant to . . . it's another one of the straw men that I'm setting up for students. The course, of course,

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culminates after a number of weeks and we discuss this issue of kind-of multiplicity or plural Buddhism that kind-of populate the world. And, of course, to accept this assignment as Buddhism in the singular as if it's a kind-of monolithic tradition, already is a kind of trap for students, right? So they fall into this idea that there is this uniform practice, right, or uniform doctrine, or uniform engagement by adherents across the world. This is another thing for me to slowly break down across the course. So yes, framing it in that way is kind-of meaningful and utilitarian for me. It's something that I can sort of leverage across the weeks.

DR: *Absolutely. And students don't go into the classroom . . . I think they have more ideas about . . . Or, I'll put it a different way. They're more likely to have ideas about Buddhism going into Religion 101 than they are about Sikhism or Jainism, or something.*

MH: Right.

DR: *Buddhism seems to be – and this is certainly the case in the UK context – seems to be the next one that you look at, if you've been raised in Christian or post Christian context – I don't know how it works with Judaism – but it seems to be the one that the teenager will then look at next in their interest in different religions. So I find that students arrive with ideas about Buddhism already.*

MH: Absolutely. I find the same to be the case here in the United States – or at least in Los Angeles. A lot of that information, I think, is coming in from sort-of popular culture. Buddhism, in many ways, has found its place in mainstream culture, in popular culture. We have the Zen of ----, fill in the blank, right? All of these transmutations of the tradition for various purposes. So students are exposed to this all the time, whether they sort-of recognise it or not. And so another exercise I do at the very beginning, day one, is just to kind-of poll the class, you know: What is Buddhism? What do you think of when I say the word Buddhism? And of course, you know, the answers kind-of range but predominantly, you see a lot of stuff reflected in that same pop culture, right? A sort of a monk or a mendicant, sitting in a robe doing nothing but meditating all day, giving up possessions and so on, and so forth. Not necessarily incorrect, but it's a fairly kind-of categorical view of Buddhism, kind-of a monolithic practice. So they do come in with something, right?

DR: *And asking students to talk about Buddhism, and I think especially in framing it as a question of religion or philosophy – these kind of questions – this leads you to recognise what you're calling a sort-of cultural language, a set of ways of talking about these things that the students are bringing into the classrooms. Is that right?*

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MH: That's right. So when I poll the class – and certainly in this first writing assignment in which I ask them to take a stance on what Buddhism is, or what they think it is, inevitably – and this of course isn't across every single student – but predominantly, across the class, I see a sort of common language being used in the classroom, and then of course in their first assignment. So, to talk about, or to get at what they think is a kind-of ethical aspect of Buddhism, right – prior to their understanding that gets worked and developed across the class – they use words like “sin”, right? And in their kind-of conception of Buddhism as a kind of – quote unquote – “godless religion” they might use a kind-of term like atheism to describe this. Similarly in their efforts to get at this idea of rebirth or kind-of cycle of being reborn back into the world, they'll use word like “afterlife”. There's maybe ten or twelve or fifteen of these terms that seem to come up during this first week or two of class (10:00). And so this, to me, was very compelling, predominantly because it seemed to be fairly uniform right across a lot of these responses. And so, during the first few years of teaching, just a few short years ago, I began teaching and thinking about what the kind-of implications are here, right? What does it mean to think about this sort-of set of ideas, and ideals, and concepts, and terms that students bring into the classroom, that are kind-of wielded in trying to define something otherwise foreign to them, or unfamiliar to them, or something that is ill-defined, at least from day one? So, yes: cultural language. There could be a better term. There's probably a theorist out there who's worked through some of this stuff a bit more accurately than I have. But cultural language or kind-of a cultural location from which they appraise a religion that is unfamiliar. Something like this.

DR: *Right, yes. But it will work for our purposes today at least. So the question that you raised is talking about what we do with these, then, in the classroom. And you set a few strategies which I'd quite like you to sort-of describe each of them in turn. Because it's quite interesting. And I have a few reflections on some of these as well.*

MH: Sure.

DR: *Whether we start with that now, or whether we go a little bit more into what we're trying to do in the classroom first and foremost – what do you think?*

MH: Yes. Maybe we could talk a little bit about this first. I mean just sort-of what we do with these sets of terms, if that's ok?

DR: *Yes, absolutely. Well, to me it seemed like it came down to the question of what we're trying to do in the classroom, in this introductory course. You know: are we, as the sort-of early anthropologists*

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were doing, are we translating unfamiliar terms into familiar terms? Or are we doing something that is more destabilising. You know, are we challenging the terms that they're using? I think it comes down to what it is that we're trying to do. And I wanted to ask you what you think you're trying to do. That sounds more aggressive than I meant to, but . . . !

MH: No, No! So, I mean, I don't want to take a complete position here, but I would say what I tried to do, class to class, is probably somewhere in between those two approaches, right? So, you know, I was an undergrad once of course. And I have been in classrooms that took the approach of kind-of immediately discarding whatever terms or understandings or positions that were brought into the classroom and working to kind-of break bad habits, as it were; trying to kind-of replace these terms with something a bit more “in house”, or something a bit more accurate or specific to the tradition that's being studied. And I think it's fair. But from a kind-of practical perspective – and I was one of these students – it can sort-of scare them off a bit. It can be sort-of paralysing, once that sure footing is kind-of removed, or pulled out from underneath the student. And of course there may be some educators out there who'd say, “Well, we must shock them into this mode of critical inquiry by shedding a lot of these bad predispositions and habits, and replacing them with ones that speak more truthfully or accurately to the object under study.” I think that's fair. But for me, again, I sort-of fall somewhere in between those two poles. So on the one hand, I do not by any means want to simply adopt these terms that students bring into the classroom and sort-of use them interchangeably. That's very dangerous and risky, and does a real disservice to whatever is trying to be done in the classroom for the educator. But I also don't think they should be sort-of left at the door, either. And so, allowing students – at least in the initial stages – to kind-of use a familiar footing, or use familiar language in ways that allow them to kind-of get an issue, or speak to a concept, or describe something, some practice or facet of a doctrine, I think, can be very, very helpful. And then, slowly, as the class goes on, you begin to kind-of replace or kind-of supplant those terms with something else. **(15:00)** So just to give a brief example, you might have students at the beginning of the course using, left and right, this term “sin”, right, describing it, in the context of Buddhism, however they sort-of deem necessary. And slowly, you might – either in paper revisions or in the classroom, verbally – you might begin to introduce a softer term, or kind-of related term like “transgression” – which I think is more kind-of categorical, it's more broad, it's not even necessarily Buddhist, right, but it is less Judeo-Christian. It sort of distances itself from that initial position. And then, as things proceed further, you might introduce – a bit more in the realm of Buddhism – something like “unwholesome action”, right? Or an action that sort of accrues karmic retribution. So, a bit more technically Buddhist and certainly a bit

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more accurate. And so, in a way, by introducing these kind-of in-between terms like transgression, that bridge that initial position to what we hope to kind-of develop as a later position for students – which is really a kind-of clear and accurate view of the Buddhist tradition in ten weeks, as best we can in a survey course – there are, I think, rhetorical strategies in the classroom, and certainly strategies that can be deployed on paper – revising papers and such – that can really kind-of steer students in a more natural way toward proper usage, accurate usage, and sort-of precise usage of these terms.

DR: *Yes. And the language that is used is so tied up with histories of . . . social histories' use of terms. It can be a very difficult task to upset associations of say Karma and sin and these kind of ideas. But there is a sort of . . . it's often tied up with a call to de-colonise the university and things, these days – which is something I have some sympathy with. But I do, also, question the degree to which the university as we know it – the Western tradition of the university – how far we can actually go with, actually, not being there to translate one alien data language into a familiar data language. I think there are ways to start doing it – as you say – to find a middle ground. But I do think that we, more or less always, inevitably end up at doing that, the same . . . you know, the same way as comparative history of religions has always been*

MH: Yes, it's difficult. Ultimately we're in a kind-of Western classroom under the guise of Western administration, right, which of course falls underneath this broader kind of category of Western perspective, and – if you want to take a critical view – of Western dominance. So you're absolutely right. There's a kind of difficulty, there, in being aware as an educator of where some of this language is coming from, where the predispositions of students are coming from, and certainly where our own predispositions are coming from, as educators trying to kind-of mediate for students. And it's a real challenge to think that we can solve the problem, or completely do away with some of those underlying – as you say – sort-of colonial values, or issues of dominance, or invasion, and so on, and so forth. And I think you mentioned critical pedagogy at the start: I think someone like [Ira Shor](#) who really is championing just a basic awareness of this as educators. Just an awareness of this issue of dominance that kind-of bubbles beneath the surface of learning processes a pedagogical processes, I think is really the key here. So while we may not be able to save the day, right, in the end, or really kind-of play that role to its fullest – especially in a ten week survey course, it's very, very difficult to have a long-lasting effect on students in that kind-of deep way that I think people like Ira Shor and others are speaking to – a kind-of basic awareness of this problem, I think, can go a long way, for sure.

DR: *And I haven't read Shor's work, so that's a great lead for me to follow up (20:00). I'm thinking*

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specifically in the way that [Russell McCutcheon](#) teaches at Alabama, for instance. I think there is a deeper issue within the field that no matter what language we use – whether we're sort-of successfully translating, or we're using our own categories, or whatever we're doing there – we are still operating within the Western category of religion. So even if we were able to translate those terms into their own language, we're still . . . by dint of talking about religion. And it's not something that we can escape, I don't think. It's part and parcel of the way the subject is set up.

MH: Absolutely. That's the problem with teaching in a discipline that's so, I think, acutely defined. And, much as we want to talk – especially now – about these issues of fluidity and dynamism, trans-sectarianism, trans-religious dialogue – lots of these kind-of things that tend to sort-of blur the lines between this tradition and that tradition, or sort-of gesture toward some shared similarities between the two – you're absolutely right: ultimately we are teaching within a discipline, through a discipline and by the guidelines of that discipline. You're absolutely right to think that that's a real challenge as well.

DR: *I think it's a deep challenge. And I think it's . . . I don't know if it's unique to Religious Studies. It's certainly acute in Religious Studies. And in some ways, it seems a bit of a Gordian Knot. So I'm not surprised you're saying that you position yourself in the middle. I don't know where else we could really . . . ! And that's kind-of why I was asking, you know: what is it that we're doing in that introductory class? Because I'm not entirely sure myself what we're doing in that introductory class. Except, I mean, I would personally go with a more sort of deconstructive route against But then, I'm not starting with Buddhism. I start with new religions, usually. And I think that there are some ways in which it's easier. So my aim is not particularly to get people to understand new religions. It's more to try and get them to think anew about their own traditions. And what they have taken for granted as being rational, or unexpected. And by showing them people who are very much like them, who do things that are supposedly crazy, or at least stigmatised, you know, that we can start getting them to think about the reasons for their own actions, and their own beliefs and things, and to break down the category a little bit. And start saying, "Oh, actually, this isn't as straightforward a thing as I thought it was!" But I guess, coming from Buddhism is a completely different ball game.*

MH: It's difficult. You look at a tradition like Buddhism with a much longer socio-cultural history than something like a new religion, right? So, I think some time has to be spent, at least, doing the historical work to kind-of flesh that out. Students need a kind-of broader context, right? So, when I teach this course we begin in India, and we go all the way up to the modern West – which, in ten weeks, is just crazy, you know, to think that we can really do any kind of service to any of those

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traditions or sub-traditions that grew out across those regions. So, in a way, I do sometimes feel like a slave to that mode of pedagogy, right, having to do a lot of this kind-of early historical background. And, certainly, we spend some time with major figures. And I do my best, certainly, to bring out some of these broader kind-of critical issues: issues of what it means to practice – what is a practice? – what it means to engage with a religion. Some of those ideas that students bring into the classroom are immediately sort-of deconstructed for them, right? We talk at length, in my class, about a lot of scandals that have occupied the Buddhist world – not only in recent times, but in the past as well. So a lot of this kind of confrontational teaching – or teaching that aims to kind-of break students of what might otherwise be kind-of an ideal image of Buddhism in their minds, when they come into the classroom – a lot of that is at work. But just kind-of the age of Buddhism, right? (25:00) It is a very, very old tradition. So there is some responsibility I think I have to take, there, in sort of playing the set-up, right, doing the kind-of long set-up.

DR: *Yes. Absolutely. So let's talk, for the last few minutes then, about how we can sort-of use this assumption of familiar language or cultural language – however we want to call it – how we can use that to our pedagogical advantage. You know different strategies that we can use – to build out a language of familiarity, we've already talked about – but how we can use it to really enhance the students learning.*

MH: Yes. Again I think this idea from Shor, who really kind-of pushes an awareness – or at least a sort-of attention to one's biases not in a kind-of self-critical way but in a kind-of positive way, right? We're meant to kind-of confront these biases, confront our cultural positions or locations, and I think, in his view, ultimately leverage them in the name of transcending them – at least momentarily. Transcending them for ten weeks in a survey course where we might adopt a more accurate set of positions, or set of terms that allow us to speak more kind-of faithfully to the tradition itself. And so, in terms of tactics, I will just confront this predisposition front-and-centre in the classroom. And so, in a way, I've always envisioned my job as an educator to be a kind-of collaborative learner, right, and a collaborative teacher. So, rather than taking this kind-of unidirectional approach and keeping this issue of predispositions and dominant culture in my mind, I'll simply put it out there for the entire class to kind-of wrangle with and deal with. And so, once it's out there on the table, we can all together be aware, as Shor says, or be kind-of cognisant of our own biases. And that allows us to kind-of use them positively. Use those biases in ways that help to better clarify, or better define, or better utilise terms that are otherwise foreign or murky for students. I think sort-of keeping a lot of those institutional biases, or cultural biases, or religious biases secret as a teacher is kind-of a disservice to students,

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right? It sounds to me like one of the things you might even be doing in your class in new religions, is building a kind-of awareness of habits, or awareness of preconceptions of what it means to be religious or, you know, do religious practice, or something like this?

DR: *Right. Absolutely. I often start the class, actually . . . I used to have a block that was in a sort of World Religions 101. And I was basically the . . . You had the five world religions and I was the other stuff. And I used to start by asking them, “Ok, so you’ve had five religions – have you been told what a religion is?”*

MH: Right, right.

DR: *They, of course, hadn't been at any point. And you know, I quite often will point out to students, “If you want to know what hegemony is – in terms of religions, what gets counted as a religion – look at the courses you’ve done! And they’ll think back to the first year and go, “Oh right! Yeah – it’s the same five!” The same things over again. And if you get something else, it’s stuck in as an extra, you know, and always with a qualifier – it’s “indigenous religions” or it’s “new religions”, or it’s “religious movements” or there’s some term that distances it . . .*

MH: Right

DR: *So yes. We talked about this in the [book](#) that I edit with Chris Cotter, actually. We called it subversive pedagogies: where you have to work within that particular set up – you know, in the university – world religions, and these kind of things . . .*

MH: Yes, and I was just, very quickly . . . Go ahead.

DR: *Yes, I was just finishing to say: you can use it to your advantage.*

MH: Yes. The nice thing about this sort of this issue is, it’s not – at least in recent years – it hasn’t been such a kind-of mystery. I mean there’s some scholars out there actually writing on this issue of what it means to do Religious Studies in academia; what it means to try to kind-of de-institutionalise or even, in some cases, de-colonise as you say the university. I’m thinking of Tomoko Masuzawa, [The Invention of World Religions \(30:00\)](#). So she really does a nice job of pointing directly at academia, at the institution itself, as a kind-of – to put it critically – a kind-of culprit in putting together what we now conceive of as – quote-unquote – “world religions”, right? So I thought of that when you said there were the first five, and then you as the sixth. It seems that this inclusive-exclusive grouping

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model, or this idea that there could be outliers to a – quote-unquote – “pantheon” of religion is not totally disconnected from the work that academics are doing. And in a lot of ways, I think, again people like Shor, and others, are pointing back at instructors and teachers as people who can sort-of re-orient the model or reconceptualise the model as sort-of not so categorical or exclusive or inclusive.

DR: *Right, yes. And one of Tomoko's points, and Russel McCutcheon makes the same point, and Tim Fitzgerald make the same point, is that actually in teaching that way, and presenting these things as facts, we are constructing that model and that worldview that the students then bring into the classroom.*

MH: Right.

DR: *And so one thing that's quite interesting, when you described the exercise, “Is Buddhism a religion or a philosophy?” it's that we can use that in a discussion afterwards, “Well – what does it matter? What is at stake if we say that Buddhism is a religion? Or if we say it's a philosophy, what's at stake there? What practical effect does that have? You could connect the use of philosophy there with the fact that atheism is coming up, and gain a real insight, there, into the way that the term religion is being mobilised, in the milieu that the students exist in. So you're no longer talking about, you know, two-and-a-half thousand years of Buddhist tradition and several continents, or whatever. You're talking about the specific way that religion is being mobilised for students in their own world.*

MH: Absolutely. I mean these students will go on to have hopefully a lengthy conversation but, in reality, a thirty-second conversation with their friends about Buddhism. You know, the word comes up, they see something on TV or whatever, and they might spout off a few lines about how they conceive of the tradition after having taken the class. And so, you know, the stakes are there. And it's sort-of how we position the tradition in relation to students in their own learning process, but also how we position the tradition in relation to the kind-of broader categorical and institutional frameworks that I think have dominated for so long.

DR: *Absolutely. It's a very simple example of how we can flip from the students' expectations that they're coming into the classroom to be told facts, and flip it until now we're talking about how ideas and our own knowledge is constructed. And that's what I think we're there in the classroom to do.*

MH: Yes. Absolutely. Sort of a reflexive approach, I think, is really, really helpful.

DR: *Absolutely. Matthew Hayes, thanks for coming onto RSP. It's been a really interesting*

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conversation. I'm sorry that we've run out of time.

MH: That's quite alright. Thank you so much, David, I really appreciate it. It's been very enjoyable.

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