What Buddhism is Not:

Presenting Buddhism to Students in the Twenty-first Century

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Buddhism suffers from a peculiar crisis. It is a crisis that is peculiar in that it is strange, interesting and fascinating. It is also peculiar in that it is rather unique to Buddhism. This is a crisis of representation: Buddhism is widely portrayed in ways that introduce misconceptions and that obscure its complexity. So far, though, we might consider that many religious traditions suffer from this. So what is unusual in the widespread, cultural representation of Buddhism?

What is peculiar here is that misrepresentation is often due to, or overlooked due to, its benign nature. It is a crisis in that an unquestioned account of Buddhism can blind us to genuine and troubling

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issues regarding the tradition—say in regard to ethical and socio-political engagement, or its political implications. Contemporary western culture often regards (and presents) Buddhism as 'gentle', and tends to look upon it with a sunny, but simplifying gaze of patronising approval. This obscures the tradition's diversity and complexity in a way that is a substantive obstacle to the educator.

Is this true? My assertion that Buddhism suffers from this benign oversimplification in widespread culture is supported through my discussions with students prior to their academic engagement with the tradition at university level. I also ran, recently, a google-news search on UK media mentions on Buddhism—which resulted in stories about meditation, music, more meditation (mindfulness, mostly), spirituality, and various cultural events. An identical search where 'Buddhism' was replaced by 'Islam' brought results focused on; Jihad, violence, extremism, veils & death threats, and more. The more you look at the cultural representations of Buddhism, the more a specific stereotype is reinforced. Buddhism is gentle, peaceful, non-exclusive, cheerful and more a spiritual path than a religion.[1] The BBC religions guide on the web calls Buddhism 'a tradition that focuses on personal spiritual development'[2]—thereby privileging the aspects of Buddhism that match this stereotype.

I am not suggesting that Buddhists are somehow not, on occasion, gentle and peaceful people—or that they are all miserable. However, this benign but orientalist and patronising view is clearly only a very partial view.

I want to briefly step away from Buddhism, and think about how we might characterise the teaching of another religion of South-Asian origin—Hinduism. As is widely noted, Hinduism is a tradition where books for the general reader, and for students, tend to open with some attempt at articulating the complexity within Hinduism. It is seen as something that is problematic to the student. Julius Lipner opens *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* by problematising what would seem an innocent question: What is 'Hinduism?':

> A provocative response would be to say that there is no such thing.

[1] Though it's wise not to get me started on the whole 'spiritual, not religious' trope…

[2] **http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/** Accessed 01/05/2011.

> The term itself is a Western abstraction of fairly recent coinage, giving the impression that Hinduism is a block reality, a homogeneous system, easily defined, which all Hindus acknowledge in more or less the same way. But as we shall see, this is not the case. Whatever else it may be, Hinduism is not a seamless system of belief in the way that many imagine or expect 'isms' to be. [3]

Of course, many attempts at dealing with this issue have not been spectacularly successful, as was noted back in the 1970s:

> It is remarkable how many modern treatises on 'Hinduism' have as their opening sentence some such reflection as 'Hinduism is very difficult to define', and then proceed to try to define it. This is to systematize and congeal the spontaneous; to insist on abstractions, a common core amidst the luxuriant welter of the faith of Hindus. [4]

But what seems undeniable is that when people begin to teach Hinduism, they begin by trying to sensitize students to a variety of issues. Hinduism is represented as a problematic term, its plurality is emphasised, we are warned of the dangers of overly abstracting it as a concept divorced from its practice. While the issues may vary from those challenges facing people teaching about Buddhism, it is notable that approaches to Hinduism are characterised by an initial articulation of methodological troubles and an untangling of preconceptions.

Returning to Buddhism, I thought about how we, those of us who write and teach about it, introduce it to new students. I looked at some old syllabi—mine and others—and found evidence of a collective guilt. I am sure there are those who do better than this, but the convention seems to be—begin with a blend of history and Buddhist sutra: start with the life of the Buddha, and move from there to his first sermon, and we're off… Here come the Four Noble Truths, followed by Conditioned Arising, Nirvana and then the early monastic tradition. After that, we may begin to get into the disputatious diversity that characterises much Buddhist tradition, but by then it may be too late for our

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[3] Lipner, Julius, *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, (Routledge, London, 1994), p.6.

[4] Smith, Wilfred Cantwell, *The Meaning and End of Religion,* (SPCK, London 1978), p66.

students. We have run the risk of fixing in students' minds that Buddhism is a trans-cultural unity, where monastic practice is normative, and that it is only later that diversity is an issue.

Irrespective of the general problems we may attribute to such an approach, my question here is quite specific. How does the teaching of Buddhism through these topics address the preconceptions of Buddhism that students bring, from their experiences of wider culture, into the classroom with them? My view is that it fails to address them very well at all. Students arrive with a set of cultural ephemera as influence (be it Buddha Bars,[5] Zen-styled document templates, Mindfulness as just another session at your local new-age holistic practice centre, meditation kits, Buddha Lounge[6] CDs, or just a general sense of Buddhism as something to do with laughing, cheery, non-threatening monks on the TV)—and my feeling is that we tend just to ignore this aspect of their prior acquaintance with the idea of Buddhism.

What I like to do is to think though how we can initiate our teaching on Buddhism in such a way that it engages with where our students currently are: that it begins in the midst of their preconceptions and then works out from there to unpick some of the notions they arrive with. How to do this seems more uncertain, and I am keen to hear from *Discourse* readers as to how we might achieve this. While the means may yet be unclear, what is clear is that if we begin with what Buddhism is not—then we might get somewhere in dealing with the aforementioned crisis of benign representation.

To this end I would like to set up a blog to address questions around Buddhism and stereotypes in teaching. Contact **dwebster@glos.ac.uk** for details.

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[5] A range of eating and drinking establishments, not a type of chocolate snack like a Mars Bar.

[6] A faintly 'Eastern' sub-genre of dance/chill-out music, linked to a type known as 'Buddha Bar'. The BBC Asian Network Review for a compilation of Buddha Lounge tracks reads 'light your joss-sticks, get your 'Om' on and set your temperature to Buddha Chill' Accessed 10/6/11. See **http://amzn.to/jObd5L**