

# Religion Teacher Update

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THE COUNCIL FOR SPIRITUAL AND ETHICAL EDUCATION

RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS OF RELIGIONS AND ETHICS IN MIDDLE AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

## Teaching Buddhism

### *“Gossip Girl” and Samsara: Buddhist Iconography in the Upper School Classroom*

by Tom Ramsey

What can a Tibetan Buddhist mandala tell students about the quality of their lives today? Here is a classroom lesson that engages students in framing their own experience using a traditional religious image. In the process, students gain a clearer understanding of the Buddhist world-view that informs the Wheel of Life mandala. The lesson can readily be adapted to a variety of contexts.

In a course for 11th and 12th grade students that explores a range of religious, philosophical, and psychological perspectives on the nature of the self, my students read most of Mark Epstein’s 1995 book *Thoughts Without a Thinker*. Epstein is a psychotherapist and a practicing Buddhist who brings together these two perspectives to describe the self in a remarkably insightful way. In the first chapter, Epstein introduces the Buddhist perspective, answering such questions as what Buddhists mean by suffering (*dukkha*), what is the role of craving (*tanha*) in creating suffering, how suffering is experienced and expressed, and how human beings can achieve liberation from suffering. Epstein explains these ideas using examples from his own clinical practice, and he organizes his discussion using the Wheel of Life mandala as a framework.

If you are familiar with this mandala, you might recall that it represents the entire cycle of experience (*samsara*), with symbols of greed, aversion, and delusion at the hub, and six major sections between the spokes depicting realms of rebirth (human, animal, divine, “hungry ghosts,” hell, and the “titans”). Although Epstein’s book lacks a picture of the mandala, you and your students can find color images online. There is also a very useful image in John Bowker’s large-format book *The World’s Religions*, DK Publishing, 1997. (Every world religions teacher’s classroom should have a copy of this beautifully illustrated book.) Just as medieval or Renaissance Christian paintings frequently use details from the artist’s own time period to depict Biblical stories, so traditional

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### *Beyond Buddha’s Birth- Tales of Teaching Tibetan Buddhism*

by Bridgette O’Brien

Rainbow dakinis, mandala making, governments in exile, circumambulating Mt. Kailas, mudras, stupas and a glimpse of what some refer to as “Virtual Tibet” are just a few ways my students ponder the development of Buddhism beyond the usual textbook coverage about Shakyamuni’s life and his fundamental teachings. As world religion teachers, most people include the basics about Siddhartha Guatama’s life and most of us have a diversity of creative ways to expose students to the four noble truths, but delving into the different Buddhist sects within the context of their regional specificity and exploring some of the primary texts of Buddhism is where the fun (for educators and students alike) really begins! Thus, after some time exploring aspects of Theravada, Mahayana and Chan/Zen Buddhism with my students, we delve into some of the nuances of the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition.

Having spent six months on the Tibetan plateau several decades ago, I find myself wanting to share with students some of the rich texture of Tibetan Buddhism that I was fortunate enough to observe. Most students have heard of the Dalai Lama, many have even seen one of the Hollywood flicks such as *Seven Year’s in Tibet* or *Little Buddha* which have exposed them to a kind of “Virtual Tibet,” but most have very little context for understanding the esoteric nature of this form of Buddhism. Thus, as a way to provide insights and deeper knowledge about Tibetan Lamaism we often begin this part of our Buddhist studies by reading excerpts from a famous Vajrayana text titled *The Life of Milarepa*. There are multiple translations of this text that one can use. I use a translation by Lobsang P. Lhalungpa published by Penguin Books (1979).

*The Life of Milarepa* recapitulates the spiritual quest of a great “sinner” who becomes a saint; the folktale not only entices students with its magic, feuds, deception and humor, but it also serves as a wonderful entrée into

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discussions about the Buddhist notions of egolessness, karma, Dharma, and Buddha nature. Moreover, the text provides insights into the importance of experience and practice which are vital aspects of any Vajrayana Buddhist's spiritual endeavors.

With limited time always being an issue when trying to teach both depth and breadth in any given religious tradition, the excerpt we read is a chapter titled "Ordeals." In this chapter, Milarepa is asked by his venerable teacher (Marpa) to build a series of different towers. Each time Milarepa begins to build a tower Marpa specifies a different shape for the structure (and unbeknownst to Milarepa there is significant symbolism behind each shape). Milarepa then proceeds to erect a portion of the tower, but before he is even half way done with his task he is asked (by Marpa) to destroy the tower and start anew. Milarepa quickly becomes frustrated as it appears to him that his hard work is to no avail. However, each time he (begrudgingly at first) destroys his work and begins again.

The point of this chapter is not only to show the importance of the karmic bond that gets developed (through these experiences and over a period of time) between teacher and student; it also illustrates the pro-

cess of Milarepa undergoing the very difficult challenge of emptying himself of ego. By the end of the chapter, Milarepa is finally allowed to complete the square tower. This tower, with its four corners on the ground, represents the stability that Milarepa has now developed in his attentiveness and presence. This stability was only achieved by Milarepa after he was able to understand how Marpa's apparent "irrational requests" to build and destroy these towers without reason was actually a form of teaching so that Milarepa could better understand what it meant to "come from a place of baseless action."

Students are initially a bit perplexed by the reading and they often miss the significance of the tower shapes. They can appreciate the challenge that Milarepa faces and they often empathize with him as a person on a difficult spiritual quest. They want him to "get it right" (even though he was a mischievous young lad, accruing much bad karma in earlier chapters) and they want Marpa to have some compassion for him. I find that our discussions often reveal students' frustration with Marpa and what they perceive to be his "crazy irrational demands." (Marpa pretends to forget what he asks Milarepa to do; he feigns drunkenness; he acts as if he changed his mind as his strategies/excuses to get Milarepa to destroy the towers in progress.) Thus, in order to contextualize Marpa's teaching strategies in terms of other aspects of Buddhism that we've explored we re-visit the Lotus Blossom Sutra (where the Buddha uses upaya to strategically get people out of the burning house or *dukkha*). With the reference to this Mahayana Buddhist sutra students are able to identify more readily with the brilliance of the transmission of the esoteric doctrine between teacher and student in the Milarepa story. Then, by the end of the discussion, they are (like Milarepa once his own awareness of Marpa's irrational demands has become clear) eager and ready for more instruction.

Bridgette O'Brien is a high school religion teacher taking time off to pursue doctoral studies in Religion and Nature at the University of Florida. She is a regular presenter at CSEE's annual Institute for Teaching the World's Religions (see announcement on p. 4)

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Teaching Judaism  
submissions / contributions invited  
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## Teaching the Eightfold Path

by Sandra Switzer

I have found that one of the many challenges of teaching comparative religions is bridging the gap between abstract concepts and meaningful, living practices. While it is relatively easy to teach 'content' and ask my students to memorize vocabulary words, descriptions of rituals, and lists of ethical norms, it is much more difficult to create the conditions of real learning. My own boredom with learning the dates and practices of festivals, the special holiday foods, the basic 'facts,' and essential practices, helps me understand the dissatisfaction my students feel when classes are confined just to information. This boredom becomes a catalyst for creative pedagogy.

One of my on-going projects has been learning how to make the steps of Buddhism's Eightfold Path relevant and meaningful to my students. I begin my unit on Buddhism with an overview of Siddhartha's life, frequently using clips from *Little Buddha* as illustration. I emphasize the psychological nature of Siddhartha's quest to understand and ease suffering for all people. After providing them with an explanation of the first Three Noble Truths, I ask them to consider how the steps of the Eightfold Path provide practitioners with practical mechanisms for reaching the goal of ending their own suffering and that of those around them. I emphasize the role of compassion in Buddhism, which empowers practitioners to make mistakes, lovingly acknowledge them, and continue practicing with humility and humor.

After introducing the Eightfold Path, I ask my students to engage in an experiment. Each student is to select one of the eight steps and put it into practice as consistently as possible for one week. At the end of that week, I invite my students to write a reflection paper in which they describe their personal understanding of their chosen step, their reasons for undertaking it for a week, a description of their experiences, and an evaluation of what they gained/ learned from the experiment.

While students have chosen all of the Eightfold steps, the majority tend to engage in 'benevolent speech' and 'beneficent action.' They become aware of the tone and con-

tent of their language, the emotions and motives underlying their actions, the challenge that comes from choosing not to speak, the difficulty in stopping their habitual patterns of behavior. They become aware of how frequently they participate in or hear gossip and struggle to redirect harmful conversations. They ponder what it means to promote the flourishing of others as well as their personal well-being. They struggle with 'white lies' and the Honor Code, how to talk with their parents and interact with people they do not like. Most of them concede that their lives improved during the exercise, but they also confess that continuing to practice is such hard work they are not likely to continue.

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In follow up conversations, I am amazed at how much the students gain from sharing their insights as well as from hearing from their peers. This lesson is an example of praxis, bringing together theory and practice and challenging my students to make the abstract ethical precepts of Buddhism a living reality. While they may only practice for one week at this time in their lives, I remain hopeful that seeds are being planted that will later take root and bloom.

Sandra Switzer is a religion teacher at the Lovett School in Atlanta, Georgia

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## Mandala, from p. 1

Tibetan images of the realms of rebirth depict these realms using details drawn from Tibetan life.

In class, we discuss Epstein's use of the mandala and of cases from his clinical practice as mutually-informing descriptions of the human experience. This is not always an easy discussion. Students often find the different realms of rebirth strange (the gods, for example, are reborn), they sometimes question Epstein's analysis of his cases, and they might hesitate to identify realms of rebirth with psychological states, as Epstein does. They are, nevertheless, usually intrigued by his creative approach.

At this point, towards the end of the discussion period, I suggest that we try making Epstein's approach our own to see if that helps us see it more clearly. I ask students to find partners for a project that will occupy them as their assignment for the next class. To each pair of students, I give an outline of the Wheel of Life mandala—a large tracing of the structure of the mandala, including the hub and the spaces for the six realms—but with the content of those realms left out. (You can easily create these outlines yourself on large sheets of drawing paper.) The assignment is for each pair of students to fill in the blank spaces for the six realms with images from their own culture. They may draw images themselves, find images online, or cut out pictures from magazines, but the images must be appropriate to the particular realms. If they cannot think of images to use for a given realm, they should look closely at the Tibetan mandala and reread Epstein's discussion of the psychological state he associates with that realm.

In the next class, students show their work (or you can give students that class period to work on the project, and then share their results in the following class). Suddenly, the mandala, and Epstein's psychological interpretation of it, takes on new life and meaning. The students' versions of the realm of the titans might show images of seniors competing blindly for advantage over one another in the race for college admissions. The realm of the gods might show bored and wealthy teens

“Each realm raises questions for discussion and reflection, as students take part in interpreting their own cultural experience using Buddhist and psychoanalytic perspectives.”

preening “Gossip Girl” style. The hell realm is always a favorite. And, the human realm is more readily understood as poised between suffering and the possibility of liberation. Each realm raises questions for discussion and reflection, as students take part in interpreting their own cultural experience using Buddhist and psychoanalytic perspectives.

In my course, we go on to read the ensuing chapters of Epstein's book and to consider, in particular, the Buddhist teaching of non-self (anatta). However, this lesson could also stand alone in a different course or context, using xeroxed handouts of Epstein's first chapter. The lesson might lend itself to courses on Buddhism, religious art, or psychology and religion. However you might wish to use it, in my experience, this lesson helps students to see their own experience in new ways and to recognize the wisdom that is embodied in such traditional religious images as the Wheel of Life mandala.

Tom Ramsey teaches religion at Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, New Hampshire

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## *Hinduism and Simile*

by Terry Hansen

Because I have the luxury of an entire semester to teach Hinduism, I can devote a significant amount of time to working with students on the process of defining it.

Using Kim Knott's *A Very Short Introduction to Hinduism* is very helpful in this process because she designs her rich little book with it in mind. Her plan is to present all the richness of Hinduism and then to sift her observations into a culminating chapter in which she attempts a definition.

Of course, the very project of definition is problematic and not just because Hinduism has such a wealth of internal diversity. A more fundamental problem is raised by this business of defining per se. Why do we need to do it? Does it really make any difference to a practicing Hindu whether or not we can define it? Is there, on the other hand, any scholarly benefit to defining it? For whom or for what purpose? I try to finesse my way around these important questions by simply presenting the problem to students as an exercise in the imaginative creation of appropriate similes for Hinduism that are specific and yet comprehensive. I rely heavily on the early work of Neil Postman, particularly in his early linguistic work, in which he explores metaphor and simile as ways of defining various terms and ideas.

Fittingly, in her final chapter, Kim Knott achieves her definition of Hinduism through two similes: the cow and the extended family reunion. So, what do I do with her approach in class? I ask students to come up with their own similes. Besides giving them a chance to explore the problem of definition in general, it also gives them a chance to tell me what they know and to be poetic and imaginative about it.

Here's what my most recent Hinduism class came up with: Hinduism is like light, the ocean, a blank canvas, a boat, a train, the United Nations, a large business/corporation, a dictionary, a chameleon, the color wheel, a window, a beard, the Midwest, music, volleyball, a vortex, a biome, tennis, and a family dinner. Each of these images is accompanied by a short explanation.

Here are excerpts from those explanations: "Light is made up of every single color in the spectrum; there are an infinite number of combinations of the different colors." "Like fish that lay eggs in the same spot at the same time every year, sacred Hindu teachings have been passed down orally for hundreds of year and remain exactly the same." "The paint for the canvas represents the vast array of people practicing this religion." "Although the train travels mainly around India, it sometimes ventures outside of the borders as well." "A window is also a way to view the world". "Beards manifest themselves differently on different people." "Like the Midwest, if you haven't lived there you can't really understand it." "Thousands of people gather in public places as well as private shrines to worship the creators and performers of music." "Different branches of the corporation have their own policies and office manuals." "In volleyball, each player on the court has some specific duty." "In the vortex one sees misty green unity and swirling gray dualism." "Living, breathing and growing together: this is the biome of Hinduism."

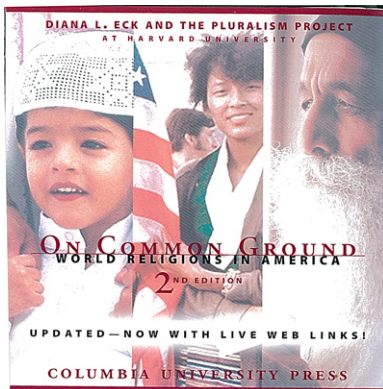
As a follow-up exercise, I ask students to write short responses to the images presented by their fellow-classmates. Sometimes this leads to discussions about ways in which images can be combined and to discussions about how using a particular image might in fact limit your ability to encompass Hinduism. This can lead to historical questions about the ways in which Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and other traditions have sometimes been limited in the way they characterize Hinduism by their own worldviews and the particular metaphors those worldviews provide for them.

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## Other Resources for Teaching Buddhism

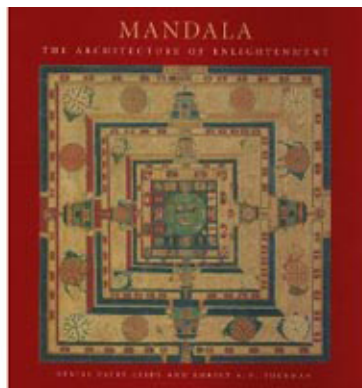
Time is always a factor in teaching world religions. Some teachers have the privilege of spending weeks on Buddhism, other teachers have much less time for each topic. Thus, my hope is to provide some different resources that could be used both individually and/or collectively as a way to supplement existing lessons about Buddhism in a wide variety of courses/contexts.



### On Common Ground mandala

- There is a very short article titled “Creating a Mandala” on the Pluralism Project’s CD titled *On Common Ground* that I use with students along with a book with wonderful images of a wide variety of Buddhist mandalas

titled *Mandala: The Architecture of Enlightenment* by Denise Patry Leidy and Robert Thurman. Together, these resources help students understand what mandalas are and how they illustrate the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence. And, if you have extra department money a 500 piece mandala puzzle may be purchased from the Denver Art Museum which is a wonderful “hands on” way for students to “experience” mandala making for themselves. A video clip of monks making a mandala may also be viewed at [http://exhibits.denverartmuseum.org/asianart/collection/tibet\\_nepal/tibet\\_mandala.html](http://exhibits.denverartmuseum.org/asianart/collection/tibet_nepal/tibet_mandala.html)



- *Virtual Tibet: Searching for Shangri-la from the Himalayas to Hollywood* by Orville Schell is another wonderful resource to use in Buddhism units. If there is time, I like to show one of the more popular movies about Tibetan Buddhism such as *Little Buddha* or *Seven Years in Tibet* and use chapters from Schell’s book to facilitate a critical inquiry into how Hollywood images about Tibet/Buddhism have impacted Americans’ (mis)understanding of this tradition.

- A wonderful alternative to these more popular Hollywood movies is a movie titled *Kundun* (produced by Martin Scorsese) which tells the story of the Dalai Lama’s life and escape into India.

*Bridgette O’Brien*

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