

Article

Experiments with Buddhist Forms of Thought, Action and Practice to Promote Significant Learning

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Abstract: While scholars have considered the centrality of teaching in Buddhist traditions and the rich pedagogical resources Buddhism has to offer academic courses on the topic, less attention has been paid to the ways in which Buddhist pedagogy might be applied to the overall structure of course design. This article addresses the challenges of presenting the richness and complexity of Buddhist traditions while also encouraging students to experientially engage such traditions in ways that promote transformative learning. It proposes using Buddhist pedagogical principles, together with a model of significant learning (Fink 2013), to design a course according to the Three Trainings in Wisdom, Ethics and Meditation. Framing the course as a series of experiments in Buddhist forms of thought, action, and practice highlights the critical perspective common to both Buddhist and academic approaches and helps maintain important distinctions between Buddhist traditions and popular secular practices. This article describes specific experiments with Buddhist ways of reading and analyzing classic and contemporary texts, films and images, together with experiments in Buddhist methods of contemplative and ethical practice, in an introductory course in order to help students see how forms of suffering that concern them might arise and be stopped or prevented from a Buddhist point of view.



Citation: Regan, Julie. 2021. Experiments with Buddhist Forms of Thought, Action and Practice to Promote Significant Learning. *Religions* 12: 503. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12070503>

Academic Editor: Beverley Foulks McGuire

Received: 20 May 2021
Accepted: 30 June 2021
Published: 6 July 2021

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Keywords: Buddhist; Buddhism; pedagogy; significant learning experiences; transformative learning; Three Trainings; contemplative studies

1. Introduction

Introductory courses in Buddhist studies continue to be popular on college campuses, even where enrollment in religious studies has declined, due to their perceived value in providing other forms of knowledge. Surveys of students indicate that they are often eager to learn about the meditation and mindfulness practices of Buddhism they've encountered in popular culture and in their fields of study, such as psychotherapy, business, and medicine. Students—and university curriculum committees—appreciate the value of courses on Buddhism for exposing students to the Asian historical contexts and cultures in which Buddhist traditions arose, thus meeting core requirements for enhancing student awareness of distinct cultural values in a broader global community. An increased emphasis on engaged learning over traditional lecture and discussion in the classroom, and a growing interest in interdisciplinary “contemplative studies” programs at a variety of public, private and religious institutions have contributed to the demand for courses in Buddhism that might employ such methods.¹

The growing body of literature on contemplative studies over the past decade shows that a number of faculty in Buddhist studies have successfully responded to the demands for courses incorporating contemplative exercises and other forms of experiential learning drawn from Buddhist traditions into more traditional academic presentations of historical contexts, sources and communities. This may include encouraging students to take part in forms of meditation (Klein 2019), contemplation (Simmer-Brown 2019), or ethical practice (Bertucio 2018) drawn from Buddhist traditions. However, presenting the richness and complexity of Buddhist traditions across space, time and cultures while encouraging

students to experientially engage such traditions is challenging for a number of reasons. Scholars of Buddhism trained to critically read and interpret literary, philosophical and religious texts in their material and historical contexts in Asian classical languages may feel unqualified to teach Buddhist practices. While using materials drawn from authorized teachers in Buddhist traditions or seeking training in traditional or secular methods to enhance one's skills is possible, this may not relieve all concerns. While practitioner-scholars may feel their experience enhances their ability to teach about Buddhist practices, they may not feel comfortable presenting such practices to non-Buddhists in non-traditional (classroom) settings (Willis 2017). Fears of being perceived as proselytizing are common due to both ethical and legal concerns.

Some faculty have addressed such concerns by emphasizing critical thinking about an exercise drawn from a Buddhist tradition in a way that "mitigates against it being an attempt to indoctrinate students" (Roth 2019). Others have responded by highlighting the secular or analogous nature of the practices they teach to those practices in Buddhist traditions (Chien 2020; McGuire 2019). Some scholars continue to have ethical and legal concerns about encouraging students to participate even in secularized practices because of the ways these remain essentially Buddhist despite their decontextualization (Brown 2019). Indeed, decontextualizing Buddhist practices blurs the boundaries between Buddhist practices of meditation and mindfulness and popular cultural forms, which lack distinctive features that make them tools for awakening. Emphasizing only practices of meditation and mindfulness, in the way contemplative studies approaches tend to do, risks reinforcing stereotypes of Buddhism that ignore its many ritual and material dimensions and distinct forms.

My proposal for an introductory course in Buddhist studies addresses these demands and concerns by framing the course as a series of experiments in Buddhist forms of thought, practice, and action drawn from distinct Buddhist traditions that are accessible to students and require no faith commitment. Highlighting the experimental approach of the course emphasizes the critical perspective common to both Buddhist pedagogical and academic methods, and helps maintain the distinctions between Buddhist traditions and popular secular practices. Experimenting not only with Buddhist contemplative practice but with Buddhist practices of reading and analyzing course material helps students to critically engage Buddhist traditions in ways that illuminate Buddhist approaches to the wisdom that is considered to be essential to liberation. While scholars have considered the centrality of teaching in Buddhist traditions and the rich pedagogical resources it has to offer academic classes on Buddhism beyond contemplative learning (Sedgwick 2003; Sarbacker 2005; Tsai 2008), there has been less attention to the ways in which Buddhist concepts about teaching might be applied to the overall structure of course design.

As I considered the objectives of my introductory course, "Buddhism in Asia and Beyond," in light of Dee Fink's research on significant learning experiences, I saw that highlighting Buddhist pedagogical strategies in designing a course on Buddhism addresses a number of goals: (1) It presents students with the opportunity to see in new ways, from Buddhist points of view, from the beginning of a course. This helps students understand the problem of analyzing other traditions from their own points of view and the misunderstandings of Buddhism that often result. (2) Experimenting not only with meditation but also with ethics and wisdom demonstrates the importance of all of the Three Trainings that are foundational in Buddhist traditions. (3) Emphasizing the ways in which Buddhism is a religion distinct from more familiar traditions like Christianity helps students understand its many dimensions beyond philosophy and meditation and beyond belief in a creator god or a central, authoritative text. (4) As students gain understanding of such differences, including Buddhism's general prohibitions against proselytizing, and its history of making teachings available to non-Buddhists without intention to convert, they become less threatened by the idea of experimenting with and learning from Buddhist approaches. (5) Students come to understand the ways in which religions are not necessarily based in the same frameworks, which limit their contributions to distinct communities of followers. As

a result, they may come to appreciate the value of the complex ways in which Buddhists contribute to a broader contemporary culture.

2. Buddhist Teaching Strategies as Significant Learning Experiences

The emphasis in Buddhist traditions on integrating contemplation and direct insight with foundational knowledge in order to promote transformation anticipates the kind of active, experiential process that Fink calls Significant Learning. Fink defines Significant Learning Experiences as those in which students claim they have learned something that actually changed the way they lived (Fink 2016, p. 6). He argues that courses producing such a transformative process incorporate six components: (1) Foundational knowledge, (2) Application, (3) Integration, (4) Human dimension, (5) Caring, and (6) Learning How to Learn (Fink 2016, pp. 34–37). Students who are encouraged to apply what they are learning to the human dimension of their experience are motivated to integrate their understanding of course material more deeply and develop skills that will prepare them for further study. Buddhist teachings are likewise student-centered, taught to distinct audiences according to their specific needs, and intended to promote application of what one is learning to one's own experience motivated by the concern one develops for the human dimensions of suffering. While the ultimate Buddhist awakening or enlightenment may seem remote from the kinds of learning experiences that are part of an academic course, transformative learning in the Buddhist tradition is also a process that teaches skills one develops gradually along a path that may take more than one lifetime. The eight-fold path, which is classically taught in Buddhist traditions as the Three Trainings in Wisdom, Ethics and Meditation, involves different forms of learning which work together to promote transformation.

The academic study of Buddhism, like any complex, developing body of knowledge, depends upon ongoing learning. My course is designed to provide students with the motivation and tools one hopes that students will take from an introductory course in order to continue exploring and deepening their understanding of Buddhism. While transformative learning may not represent the primary goal of faculty seeking to present Buddhist traditions in all their complexity, Fink suggests that courses organized around significant learning experiences are more successful than courses designed around content in helping students to comprehend and retain such course content, which they are otherwise not likely to remember for long after the completion of the course (Fink 2013, p. 63).

Many introductory courses in Buddhist studies, including my own, present a historical survey from the time of the Buddha and the early foundational teachings shared by all Buddhist traditions to the specific forms of Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions that continue to have an impact in the world today. Recognizing the value of contemplative studies and student interest in Buddhist meditation, I have typically included exercises in meditation and mindfulness in my courses along with exams and papers that encourage students to learn about Buddhism and reflect on what they have learned. My redesigned course, emphasizing significant learning experiences, still uses a chronological approach. This invites students to examine both foundational canonical teachings as well as the distinct forms Buddhism takes as it adapts across time and space. The emphasis on historical and cultural contexts means experiments with Buddhist forms of training in Wisdom, Ethics and Meditation are not decontextualized from the distinct traditional and modern forms of Buddhism in which they are situated.²

Methods for training in Wisdom or insight in Buddhist traditions are said to perfect one's understanding of the dharma and inspire the intention to complete the path that puts an end to suffering. Our corresponding study of Buddhist Forms of Thought involves experiments with reading and contemplating Buddhist sources through the lens of distinct Buddhist traditions and commentators in order to put these ways of seeing into practice and examine their impact on the human experience of ourselves and others. Experiments with Buddhist techniques for training in wisdom help us understand how suffering arises and can be stopped through the techniques and perspectives of distinct Buddhist traditions. Buddhist forms of training in Ethics traditionally promote disciplining or perfecting

one's actions so as to reduce suffering and promote the conditions for awakening while supporting training in Buddhist wisdom and meditation. Our corresponding training in Buddhist Forms of Action involves experiments with taking vows drawn from different Buddhist traditions in order to examine how the process of contemplating, observing, and refining intentional actions might reduce forms of suffering that concern us and the Buddhist communities we study. Our study of distinct forms of Buddhist Meditation is concerned with training the mind to develop the concentration and insight that ends suffering and leads to awakening. Our corresponding experiments with Buddhist Forms of Meditation help us understand how applying effort in practices of concentration and awareness might help address forms of suffering we and others experience.

Highlighting our use of these Three Trainings as experiments in Buddhist forms of Thought, Action, and Practice emphasizes that the point of our project is not to become Buddhists, but to experiment with Buddhist strategies for learning what Fink would describe as Foundational Knowledge of Buddhism. These trainings are not intended to lead to a state of awakening but to wake us up to new ways of seeing, thinking and being in the world. Emphasizing the difference of perspectives involved in such experimental shifts helps focus students on the goal of expanding cultural awareness. At the same time it guards against tendencies to assimilate Buddhist approaches into non-Buddhist frameworks and agendas the way that meditation and mindfulness are often approached. Calling attention to Buddhist ways of reading and thinking that traditionally depend on students' own critical evaluation of what they have learned, together with Buddhist forms of practice that depend on their own insights, underscore the nondogmatic agenda of the course. Such approaches also present a method for reflecting on self and other and issues that students may find personally valuable. According to Fink, students often report that deepening their understanding of themselves and others is the most valuable form of learning they do in college (Fink 2013, pp. 50–51). It is not uncommon for students to claim that a course which effectively provides them with an opportunity to do this changes their lives, opening up a new way of seeing or being in the world. This kind of transformative learning is a goal of both Buddhist and academic traditions, such as the liberal arts, that seek to expand student's perspectives about themselves and others.

Students experience a course as transformative when it provides them with opportunities to learn something meaningful and relevant to their own lives. Fink theorizes that learning about self and other, which he calls the Human Dimension of learning, and the development of Caring or finding value in what one learns, represent two of the components that work together with other elements such as Foundational Knowledge, Application, Integration and Learning How to Learn to create Significant Learning Experiences. If faculty want students to understand and remember foundational knowledge about Buddhist traditions, and to know how to use or apply this knowledge so that it becomes integrated into their understanding of the world, then providing occasions for students to take a genuine interest in or care about what they are studying is essential. Opportunities to explore the human dimension makes them more likely to become the kind of students who not only retain what they have learned in the course but to continue to deepen their understanding of the material throughout their lives (Fink 2013, pp. 34–37; 2016, p. 6).

In sum, the multiple forms of learning students develop in their experiments and associated reflections, in dialogue with those of their classmates and the real-life practitioners they encounter through readings, field trips and films, inspire students to pay attention to what they are reading and to show more interest in attending and participating in class. As experiments reveal what students know and do not yet understand, personal assumptions are exposed and common misunderstandings about Buddhism are clarified. Students are more likely to take an interest in material that seems relevant to their lives, beyond whatever might be necessary to pass an exam. The attention that students bring to their experiments in Buddhist forms of learning as a result helps them to understand Buddhism the way Buddhists do, revealing dimensions of experience or knowledge that may be missing from popular cultural forms of meditation or mindfulness. Such deepened insights

position students to appreciate a variety of distinctive features of Buddhist traditions that are often misunderstood.

3. Experiments with Buddhist Forms of Thought to Understand the Problem of Suffering

3.1. *The Problem of Ignorance: A Buddhist Approach to the Study of Buddhism*

In order to introduce students to foundational knowledge about Buddhism within a Buddhist pedagogical framework, we examine our ignorance on the first day of class. If Buddhism regards ignorance as the source of all suffering, and if the suffering that inspired the Buddha to find a solution to it still concerns us today, how might our own ignorance be involved? What might Buddhists have to teach us to help us overcome the ignorance that is responsible for suffering? Most important, what do Buddhists have to teach us that we might not have considered on our own?

In order to understand what Buddhists have to teach us in an academic course, we must also address the ignorance about Buddhism which non-Buddhist approaches to studying it often perpetuate. This challenge is already evident in the term Buddhism, developed in Orientalist European sources, which has no equivalent term in the early Asian languages in which the dharma of the Buddha developed. Our appreciation of this problem of understanding distinct forms of experience, such as religion, in terms of concepts that may not apply to others, provides the foundation for our experiments with Buddhist forms of thought, action and practice.

In studying Buddhist forms of thought, our basic model for active learning comes from the classic Buddhist approach to three kinds of wisdom or knowledge (*prajñā*) that may traditionally be obtained from study: the wisdom that comes from listening (*śrutamayī-prajñā*), the wisdom derived from contemplating (*cintāmayī-prajñā*), and the wisdom that is cultivated from meditative experience (*bhāvanāmayī prajñā*).³ In order to explore the foundations of Buddhist traditions in the first part of the course, we follow the ancient Indic approach that privileges telling stories above the recording of histories or chronicles. Students are invited to experiment with reading, experiencing and contemplating the story of the life of the Buddha the way Buddhists do, in order to understand the kinds of truth such stories tell.

Rather than presenting foundational knowledge of the historical contexts of early Buddhism on its own, we begin with the story of the life of the Buddha as it is told in Buddhist traditions and use the questions that arise from this reading as an opportunity to investigate modern scholarship about Buddhism from Rupert Gethin (Gethin 1998) and Damien Keown (Keown 2013). Keown's discussion of the narrative dimension of religion helps us to consider how different kinds of truth emerge in such a tale. Further scholarship helps us understand the distinct histories present in the cultural contexts of early Buddhism and the doctrines, aesthetic forms, practices and communities we encounter in its narratives. The story itself, as it emerges in scenes and becomes unified into a variety of tales in the Sutra and Vinaya literature, presents opportunities to discuss how the dharma developed in oral traditions and became inscribed in distinct canons. The dharma the Buddha teaches throughout his lifetime presents opportunities to examine doctrines as they are systematized from the discourses and precepts into numbered lists, such as the four noble truths, that become the Abhidharma. While some communities of Buddhists may rely on certain texts to inspire confidence or devotion, we also note the contrast of the enormous body of Buddhist literature in distinct oral and literary languages with central authoritative texts in other religions, such as the Bible or the Qu'ran. Whether or not the Buddhists that rely on them consider their pages to represent the literal word of the Buddha (*buddhavacana*) carried through multiple languages, recitations and inscriptions for hundreds and thousands of years, their continuities help archaeologists and scholars reveal historical knowledge. Discussing episodes in the life of the Buddha, such as his teaching career, and the development of the early monastic community, allows us to introduce the role of women in the development of Buddhism, and the ways in which

early Indic concepts of gender, sexuality, and class both challenged and were challenged by early Buddhists. Such issues are returned to in the broader narrative of the contexts that develop in the distinct traditions of Buddhism that develop across time and space. While the focus on experiments means the course is not organized around issues, students have an opportunity to look further into those that engage them in a final project. Such projects are intended to encourage the “Learning How to Learn” that is important in the ongoing project that is essential in understanding Buddhism.

3.2. Reading and Contemplating Narratives: Wisdom and the Life of the Buddha

The basic premise of Buddhism is that radical change in the human condition is possible and that such a change depends on a shift in perspective. Stories are among the most important tools Buddhists use to illustrate, inspire, and enable transformation. Since they call on the human experience, stories make the dharma accessible to ordinary human beings, who may lack the virtue or scholastic training developed in monasteries. These features also make them accessible to an introductory class on Buddhism. Emphasizing the narrative dimension of Buddhist traditions does not mean that more doctrinal and even historical ways of understanding are ignored. Rather, the human dimensions of stories inspire intellectual curiosity about Buddhism which enhances student’s abilities to integrate foundational knowledge.

Narratives make up a large portion of Buddhist literature and represent one of the most important ways of presenting teachings on how suffering arises and can be stopped in human experience. Students in a course on Buddhism can be introduced to a variety of sources that depict journeys from ignorance and suffering to wisdom and liberation, from early songs of self-described vain, indulgent courtesans freed from the turmoil of sensual pleasures in the Theravada tradition to stories of liberation in the Tibetan tradition that demonstrate how even evil doers who have caused terrible destruction are capable of awakening with enough dedication and training. Reading such literature, students have the opportunity to experience how Buddhist ideals about the possibilities of liberation for ordinary, flawed human beings are revealed and to reflect on the encouragement or inspiration these tales might provide. Thus they are invited to consider the human dimensions of their own lives, namely the ways in which suffering arises and might be diminished in their own experience. The Buddha’s teachings represented in these sources include scenes from his own life as Siddhartha (as well as previous lives as a bodhisattva) that illustrate the importance of encounters with suffering as a motivation to understand how it arises, find the methods that ultimately enable him to stop it, and teach this approach to others.

Presenting multiple sources of the life of the Buddha, including scenes from Aśvaghōṣa’s *Buddhacarita*, as well as sources drawn from Sutra and Vinaya represented in textbooks (Keown 2013; Gethin 1998) and in a BBC film, *The Life of the Buddha* (Maltby 2003), helps students understand both continuity and diversity in Buddhist traditions. Students are first invited to simply listen to, read and experience the story as a narrative and to consider important scenes of Siddhartha’s journey and the details of the events that engage or interest them in his experience as a character in the story. Calling attention to students’ experience of the story, as the wonders and the challenges of Siddhartha’s journey unfolds is important since this is the way the scenes of the story can be said to work in the canonical discourses of the Buddha in the traditional collections. Rather than presenting a conceptual model of the path to awakening, narratives of the life of the Buddha invite their readers to enter the experience of suffering and the process of awakening for themselves. The poetic images and dramatic scenes of the life of the Buddha stimulate the senses and evoke emotions in ways that may provoke a glimpse of experiential insight into how suffering arises that may be developed with further training. As an example, the scene of the awakening that recounts the four watches of the night in *Buddhacarita* provides a glimpse of the Buddha’s ultimate realization. The scene illustrates how suffering is stopped when the ignorance that allows karmic conditioning to continue producing cyclic existence in samsara is completely destroyed.

3.3. Understanding & Analyzing Foundational Buddhist Doctrine: The Wheel of Life

While the first experiment in Buddhist forms of thought invites students to consider how narratives developed from Sutra and Vinaya literature make meaning and present opportunities for contemplating the ways in which suffering arises and can be stopped, the second experiment with Buddhist forms of thought gives students an opportunity to begin to analyze this process using doctrines they have also studied in Sutra and the lists and systematization of teachings such as the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the Three Trainings and other Buddhist tools that become the Abhidharma. To highlight the different dimensions through which Buddhist traditions work, we move from literary works to material culture to consider the Wheel of Life (*bhāvacakra*) that is often painted on the walls of Tibetan monasteries today as it was according to Buddhist traditions in the time of the Buddha. This wheel illustrating how all things come into being is commonly used to teach how suffering arises in the process and to demonstrate how it might be stopped. The film, *Wheel of Life: Central Teachings of Buddhism* (Bastian 1980) based on the teachings of Professor Geshe Sopa⁴, provides an excellent introduction to the oldest known version of such a painting in the Ajanta caves of India, dated to the 5th to 6th century CE. In this film and a related article (Sopa 1984), Sopa describes the traditional Tibetan Buddhist ways of using the wheel to illustrate how karmic conditioning shapes what we understand to be a self and its vulnerability to the three poisons of ignorance, aggression and craving. These poisons result in the positive or negative karmic choices that produce rebirth in the various realms of samsara displayed on the wheel.⁵

Students use a simplified diagram of the wheel as a tool to experiment with considering how their own karmic choices might result in a future life in one of these samsaric realms from the traditional point of view described in the film. After clarifying what these realms are and how they operate in this traditional sense, we turn to the way the realms might function in a psychological sense, as described by another late 20th century Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Chogyam Trungpa in his teachings to his American students. According to Trungpa, the wheel may be used to analyze how each act of suffering within one lifetime may arise and result in emotional states. Trungpa describes them as “styles of imprisonment.” As students experiment with the ways in which their peers might find themselves caught up in the six different “styles” of suffering (from the anger of a hell-like state to the stupidity of the animal, or the self-absorption of those like gods), they gain experience with Buddhist forms of analysis they will use to consider foundational teachings on how suffering arises and can theoretically be prevented. Subsequently, they apply this analysis to a form of suffering that concerns them.

3.4. Telling a Story of How Suffering Arises from a Buddhist Point of View

Rather than representing what Fink would consider their foundational knowledge of the core principles and methods of early Buddhist thought in standard essays or exams, students are invited to apply what they have understood by telling a story of how a specific form of suffering arises in their own experience, according to the Buddhist perspectives, approaches and interpretations they’ve experimented with in the first part of the course. While I generally discourage students from choosing topics that are too emotionally challenging for this assignment,⁶ their personal experience with and concern about the problem of suffering they choose is important as it presents details they can use to flesh out what Fink calls the human dimension of their study. Such an approach is more likely to lead to what Fink describes as caring in ways that help them become better students of the doctrine and methods we’ve explored in order to make the assignment a significant learning experience they can build on. Directing students to consider small, specific examples of suffering they’ve witnessed or experienced generally works best for this assignment, since it points students to the more pervasive qualities of suffering described in Buddhist traditions as always a part of life as a kind of stress (*duḥkha* or *dukkha*). Approaching the assignment like this helps students to consider how basic Buddhist theoretical frameworks might apply to their own experience, allowing them to integrate what they have learned,

in the way that Fink describes. In my experience, such an integration of understanding gives students a strong foundation with which to examine distinct Buddhist approaches to how suffering might be stopped in the second part of the course.

4. Experiments to Stop Suffering with Buddhist Forms of Thought, Action and Practice

While Buddhism may see the end of all suffering (nirvana) as the final goal, ordinary Buddhists often see themselves on the path of trainings to reduce negative actions and promote positive ones in order to reduce ordinary suffering in this life and create conditions for a good rebirth. Just as the experiments with Buddhist forms of training in wisdom in the first part of the course prepare students for the assignment of telling a story of how suffering arises from a Buddhist point of view, so the experiments with training in forms of thought, action, and practice drawn from the Buddhist teachers and communities encountered in the second part of the course. What we study in this section forms the basis for an assignment describing how suffering may be stopped or prevented by training in Buddhist forms wisdom, ethics, and meditation.

Each of the experiments in the second part of the course builds on the foundational teachings of the early Buddhist canon we studied in the first part of the course. Having experimented with these forms of training in wisdom demonstrated in the life and early teachings of the Buddha to analyze how suffering arises and might theoretically be stopped, we go on to experiment with approaches to ethics and meditation likewise demonstrated in these canonical sources, and in the new forms of thought, ethics and practices that emerge to present the dharma in the expanding historical contexts and communities in which Buddhism develops across Asia and beyond.

4.1. Seeing, Contemplating and Practicing Meditation: *The Dhamma Brothers*

In order to consider the ways in which Buddhist training in meditation is used not only to achieve enlightenment but to stop or prevent suffering for ordinary beings, students watch the documentary *The Dhamma Brothers* (Phillips et al. 2007). They also read related material on Vipassana (Keown 2013) and the Pali Suttas that introduce the techniques of the four foundations of mindfulness and the concentration on breathing that are taught in the film.

The Dhamma Brothers assists the transition to our experiments with meditation, ethics and wisdom by outlining the strategies of Buddhist training in wisdom, introducing a community or sangha, and “the teachings of the Buddha” on meditation, while also raising the question of what it means to be Buddhist. The film focuses on telling the stories of four men in a maximum-security prison who take part in an experiment with a ten-day course in Vipassana and the subsequent development of their ongoing practice over a number of years. Students have the opportunity to glimpse the process of the men’s journeys to be free of suffering in a compelling way that adds a contemporary human dimension to what they witnessed the life of the Buddha. Students are likewise enabled to integrate their theoretical understanding of how meditation might work to stop suffering with the evidence of the human dimension of these stories. The actual process men such as Edward and Grady are able to use to tolerate the challenging feelings of pain they experience rather than reacting to them with the aggression, attachment or denial that would cause further suffering is both instructive and often moves students to deepen their studies.

The benefits the men in the film enjoy as a result of their practices, such as the relief and sense of peace that comes from releasing long buried wounds and anger, and the ability to respond to challenging emotions in ways that transforms their lives, naturally inspire students to consider experimenting with such practices themselves. The film presents a practice of mindfulness of breathing, which emphasizes concentration on the breath in order to prepare the practitioner to work deeply with sensations in the body subsequently explored in Vipassana. Edward says *this practice* “opens up the head” and “helps you think about you.” (Phillips et al. 2007) One of the volunteer instructors describes the practice of Vipassana as simply “to see things as they are—to see the reality inside yourself as it

is, which as he says is often not a very pleasant experience." Once one has the training to experience their feelings and sensations in the body they are able to just observe them and not react to them in habitual ways. "It's a choice", another man explains, about the skills he has gained to reject negative impulses in challenging situations, "Vipassana gave me the opportunity to make a choice about how I act." The human dimension presented in the narrative context of these scenes in the film illustrates how the techniques we read about in the Pali suttas and in chapters on meditation in Gethin and Keown work, and so helps students integrate foundational knowledge with the experiential evidence the men in the film provide.

Students who choose to perform this experiment in meditation use a ten-minute video by S.N. Goenka (Goenka 2014) to guide them in the practice of concentration on the breath described in the film and the *Anapanasati Sutta*.⁷ As is common in practices focused on concentration in many traditions, they are instructed to simply notice any thoughts or feelings that occur, and then come back to the breath. Students experiment with this mindfulness of breathing technique once a day for approximately one week. They take notes and report on what they experienced, using the film and readings to clearly describe the exercise.

While there are at generally at least five different forms of meditation students can experiment with in the course, including forms of Zen and Tibetan traditions, they all share a form of the foundational practice introduced in the films, emphasizing the importance of the effort, concentration and mindfulness that are the three steps of the eightfold path outlined in the life and early teachings of the Buddha we have discussed previously. *The Dhamma Brothers* is especially helpful in introducing students to the importance of effort in meditation due to the challenges practitioners describe, particularly in the context of the ten-day retreat in a maximum-security prison. While many students have tried meditation in the past, they often describe the challenges they have found in pursuing a consistent practice. Practicing Vipassana is an ongoing process, as one of the teachers explains, since "negativity doesn't necessarily pass away . . . it's a lifelong effort." Yet, it obviously pays off in such circumstances as one of the men describes:

"I got life without parole. I was seeking to escape—violent—life in constant turmoil. And, this is like a break from everything. This is like freedom. It's setting me free."

Such examples along with the insights students gain from their own experiment with meditation may help to inspire students to persist, knowing that the benefits of such training may come until long after their experiments in the course have ended.

4.2. Putting Intentions to Stop Suffering into Action: Choosing, Refining and Observing Vows

While meditation is the emphasis of the Vipassana practice described in *The Dhamma Brothers*, it is closely connected with the ethics required to have the kind of life in which it can be practiced. Thus the film highlights the way that clarity of mind allows for moral choices that prevent us from creating the conditions of suffering we want to avoid.

The first of three experiments on ethics asks students to consider the five precepts as they work in *The Dhamma Brothers* and in the excerpts from the Vinaya we've read in the Pali canon and background from Gethin and Keown. Students have the opportunity to experiment with taking vows, as the Brothers did during the retreat (i.e., with the idea that they may be beneficial, but not in order to become Buddhists). They choose one of these five vows they think might be helpful in stopping or preventing a form of suffering that concerns them and observe it for approximately one week. They are also invited to add details they think will help them to observe the vow, like those we have seen in the monastic precepts in the Pali canon. Since studying and contemplating one's vows is not as straightforward as it may seem, students are asked to keep a journal to note when they are faced with questions or choices that threaten their chosen vow throughout the day. If they have upheld their vows for the day they should note this. If they think they have broken their vow, they are invited to retake it and start again just as monastics do to

recommit themselves each month on the new moon and full moon. Students then report on what they experienced in using the readings to introduce the technique, some details of what happened and how they believe it might work to stop a form of suffering that concerns them.

Experiments with taking Buddhist vows help students integrate what they have learned about Buddhist doctrine with Buddhist practice and to expand their understanding of how these work. For example, some of the experiential insight students gain in this experiment comes from their reflection on the ways in which intention affects action and its consequences. This helps integrate foundational knowledge about karma with its more subtle manifestations. The realization that it is difficult to keep vows without paying attention to what one is doing helps students understand how precepts are not simply obedience to rules but practices for developing mindfulness. The fact that students often find themselves breaking their vows provides the context for understanding that Buddhists are no more “enlightened” than anyone else. Finally, the practice of taking vows helps to introduce some of the ways Buddhist misconduct is distinct from Christian sin. While keeping one’s vows may involve virtue and avoidance of wrongdoing, Buddhists are not commanded to do so by a moral authority. Precepts are voluntary observances, which one actively chooses to uphold. Rituals for repairing broken vows on the new moon and full moon of each month demonstrate how keeping Buddhist vows is a process involving trial and error.

Students are invited to consider how they might design their own vows to address specific forms of suffering, just as Buddhist monastic traditions lay out specific instructions to protect the intentions of members of the community. One student reflecting on the sufferings caused in relationships suggests, “I could make a vow to avoid the lounge, where that guy who is always flirting with me hangs out, if I want to be faithful to my boyfriend at home.” Reducing the possibility of interactions that might involve craving that leads to suffering presents both a practical way to prevent suffering and a more refined view of how Buddhists use vows to support themselves and others.

4.3. Chanting, Contemplating and Experiencing Non-Dual Wisdom: Going Beyond Fear of Gun Violence

While the training in wisdom we’ve used to consider how suffering arises in the first part of the course works with the logic of the foundational teachings of the Buddha, Mahayana approaches to wisdom, which we explore in the second part of the course, introduce new ways of reading that work beyond logic. These Mahayana approaches to textuality including negation, paradox, and poetic techniques intended to break down the conceptual thinking that may limit the perfection of wisdom and thus hinder one’s capacity to go completely beyond suffering.

Given the Mahayana’s ambition to go further to “perfect wisdom” in this way, I invite students to consider some of the more challenging topics that concern them for our experiments with Mahayana Buddhist forms of thought. While I have previously encouraged students to avoid topics that might be overwhelming or traumatizing, I do not want to neglect the importance of facing forms of suffering they actually want to confront that often arise in our discussions. Buddhist teachings stress the importance of facing suffering directly, rather than denying or avoiding it. For example, while the anxiety caused by students’ exposure to gun violence, whether in their own Philadelphia communities or forms of police or mass shootings in the news, may be explained using the logic we have explored previously, facing a fear of death from a Buddhist point of view may require a different kind of wisdom than that one might use to address other forms of anxiety.

We use the Heart Sutra, as commonly chanted in Mahayana traditions, for this experiment with non-dual Buddhist Forms of Thought as we used the Wheel of Life and its commentaries previously. The Heart Sutra is a text that is chanted and taught in both more traditional and modern Buddhist traditions. Thich Nhat Hanh’s commentary is read for its

accessibility to contemporary students, and its engaged Buddhist approach that tends to speak directly to student concerns about suffering.⁸ The Heart Sutra, Hanh explains

“isn’t an intellectual exercise; it is a matter of our liberation” (Hanh 2017, p. 53)

In order to understand how this text may help us to “find insight into our actual situation and liberate ourselves from our afflictions, suffering and fear”, as Hanh suggests, I invite students to read, contemplate and put this work into practice, according to Buddhist methods we’ve applied previously.

Reading the Sutra in the way that is common in Zen and many Tibetan Buddhist temples today means chanting it. While we have discussed the importance of chanting in the oral traditions through which the early teachings of the Buddha were gathered and transmitted, and have heard contemporary Buddhists performing chants in Pali and Tibetan (as in the film *The Wheel of Life*), I am mindful of the way reciting scripture may bring up associations with Christian traditions of prayer or professions of faith. These associations might deter students from participating in such an exercise, even if the text itself is not explicitly devotional. While I would not suggest that students recite any sort of text that might mark them as a Buddhist, such as the vow of taking refuge in the Buddha, dharma and sangha, the Heart Sutra is a very different sort of text. I reassure them that this text is not a profession of faith or a creed. If anything, I point out, the Heart Sutra appears to negate the foundational truths of Buddhism we have studied so far.

In order to read (i.e., recite) the Sutra in the way common in Zen traditions, I hand out copies of the Heart Sutra used by the Kwan Um School, which is simplified for rhythmic recitation in English. I remind students that they are not required to try the experiment if it makes them uncomfortable, and that chanting the Heart Sutra will not make them Buddhists. The point is to allow them to experiment with how this Mahayana Sutra might work according to Hanh, to “find insight into our actual situation and liberate ourselves from our afflictions, suffering and fear,” such as that caused by gun violence. Finally, to make sure that students are not concerned about chanting something they do not understand, I expand on Hanh’s commentary, translating the Sanskrit mantra at the end of the Sutra, “*gate gate pāragate pārasamgate bodhi svāhā*” which means “gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond,” the limitations of our concepts to the state of “*bodhi*” or awakened mind/heart that “*svāhā*” affirms is (“so it is”) possible.

I ask the students to stand for this recitation since this is part of what Buddhists do in the contemporary Zen tradition with which we are experimenting. Standing up is also helpful in taking students out of the habits of sitting and reading a text on one’s own or in class. They often laugh a bit, which allows for release of anxiety about what they are going to do. I then lead the students who elect to join in the experiment in chanting the syllables of the Sutra to the lively beat of a wooden temple block as a recording of the Kwan Um School plays in the background.⁹ The chanting of the members of the Kwan Um School provides a robust chorus that encourages quieter students to join in. As soon as we sit down again, I invite students to pause in meditation, if they choose, as would be traditional in many Zen traditions, to see how this chanting might impact this meditation, or simply reflect on their experience of this Buddhist approach to reading.

What was it like? I then ask students to report. What does the text do? I ask. How does it make you feel? What is happening as we chant it? Students often note the unsettling feeling produced by chanting, “No eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind.” They also express confusion about the negation of the Four Truths and the Eightfold Path that explains how freedom from suffering is attained. This is the essence of the Buddha’s teaching we have previously discussed. How could the confusion provoked by a text like this be helpful from a Buddhist point of view?

The way the Sutra works to take the mind beyond the comfort zone of ordinary assumptions becomes clearer as we read and discuss Hanh’s commentary. As he writes, “If the wave only sees its form, with its beginning and end, it will be afraid of birth and death. But if the wave sees that it is water and identifies itself with the water, then it will be emancipated from birth and death” (Hanh 2009, p. 24). In our discussion of

Hanh's commentary students begin to see how chanting the Sutra undermines the dualistic structures in conventional thinking that obscure the reality of the "interbeing" Chanting the mantra demonstrates how one might take on the bodhisattva's point of view that has "gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond," ordinary ways of seeing life and death. Students thus have an opportunity to reflect on how the practice of experiencing "No eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind" again and again might work to familiarize them with a state of being that no longer clings to the loss of self that might occur as a result of gun violence.

4.4. Putting Non-Dual Wisdom into Practice: Racism—Can Mindfulness Change Our Minds?

The second experiment which attempts to put Mahayana forms of non-dual wisdom into practice addresses the challenging problem of racism. Training in conceptual forms of wisdom, ethics and meditation in Buddhist traditions may be helpful in understanding and responding to racism, as readings by contemporary African American Buddhists in distinct traditions, such as Gaylon Ferguson (Ferguson 2006), bell hooks (hooks 2006) and Rhonda Magee (Magee 2019) suggest. Such approaches may not be enough on their own, of course, since racism is a structural problem, and implicit biases continue to operate beyond our conscious levels of awareness.

In this experiment we combine a form of meditation that has been shown to reduce racist bias in white college students (Lueke and Gibson 2014) with instructions on Zen that highlight the non-duality of self and other. I begin by asking students who wish to participate to get up from their desks (again inviting them out of the habits familiar to the classroom) and find a person in the room whom they do not know well, who seems at least superficially different from themselves. The students and their partners are then instructed to find a place in the room where they feel comfortable and sit facing each other in pairs. They are instructed that it is all right to laugh, as the exercise may feel awkward at first. They are free to leave their eyes open or close them. Their goal is to simply to support one another in a short practice of meditation.

We begin with instructions on posture drawn from Shunryu Suzuki's *Zen Mind Beginner's Mind* (Suzuki 2009). This involves mindfulness of the body: sitting upright; not leaning forward, back, or to the side; alert yet relaxed, as if "holding up the sky" with one's head. As students adjust their postures to the furniture of the classroom, I invite them to notice their feet on the ground, their weight on the seat of the chair, and other sensations. They are then asked to lower their gaze, or close their eyes, so that they are aware of their partners, yet not looking at anyone or anything in particular. We focus on mindfulness of the breath, noting the way the air flows in and out of the body. Students are instructed to bring their attention back to a focus on the breath each time their minds wander to a thought, sound, or feeling. According to Buddhist theories of meditation we have studied, such a practice focuses and calms the mind. This is said to open up the possibility of insight or seeing things as they actually are.

In the second part of this experiment, students extend their experience of the breath inside and outside the body to their experience of self and other in the room. As Shunryu Suzuki describes it, "you" and "I" are just "swinging doors" through which air flows in and out. "You is the universe in the shape of you", and "I is the universe in the shape of I," he explains (Suzuki 2009, p. 29). With this reflection in mind, and the idea that according to Buddhists we are always projecting our experience of self and other, I then ask the students to imagine their partners, whom they have chosen for their apparent difference, through the key stages of their lives.

Students first contemplate their partners as a baby, as they themselves once were. As I remind them that this may be awkward and that laughter is okay, I invite them to consider possible details, such as a bald head or fuzzy hair. I emphasize that they are just making this up. Asking students to consider others in these phases of life as they once were invites them to consider their projections as we have read in *Zen Mind Beginner's Mind*: how the "universe in the shape of I" constructs a "universe in the shape of you." Students

contemplate their partner as a child on a playground, in a moment of happiness or sadness, and in a moment of awkwardness in the halls of high school. After a brief glimpse to look up at each other as they are now, students conclude the exercise by simply thanking their partner and returning to their seats.

The experience of exchanging self with other may feel too intimate to be immediately shared. It is common, in subsequent reflections, for students to express surprise at how deeply they seemed to experience this person they did not really know. One student commented that it felt like the first time a stranger had looked beyond her hijab at her humanity. Whether or not the experiment has any lasting impact on racism, it provides at least a glimpse of how forms of insight experienced in Buddhist meditation might, at least temporarily, reduce the distance between self and other in which bias operates.

5. Conclusions

As students experience the impact of their initial experiments in Buddhist forms of thought, action and practice, their intellectual curiosity about subsequent course material often deepens. When readings on Buddhist philosophy are seen not only as a repository of knowledge but a tool for transforming lives, students are more likely to invest in reading them. The significant learning experiences connect students to the human dimension of the material and inspires them to value what they are learning. This promotes deeper engagement in scholarly knowledge and experiments that provoke experiential insight. The result is a more complex and nuanced understanding of Buddhist traditions than a course that relies on traditional scholarly presentation alone. Experiments with seeing how Buddhists see and doing what Buddhists do allows students to gain the experiential understanding that often motivates them to take the course while providing the cultural and global awareness the university often wants an introductory course on Buddhism to provide. It is not uncommon for a student engaged in such a course to write the professor, after a year or more, to say the course has had the ultimate outcome and “changed their life,” or inspired significant learning.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: Thanks to the Buddhist Pedagogy Group of the AAR for encouraging me to present a paper on the preliminary version of the experimental model I discuss here in 2019. Thanks also to Tom Pearson at the Wabash Center Journal on Teaching for the encouragement to develop my research into an article and to Julie Klein for her feedback on various drafts. Special thanks to Dean Pamela Barnett of La Salle University for providing a workshop with L. Dee Fink on Course Design for Significant Learning which was instrumental in the redesign of the course discussed.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Such institutions include Brown University, Emory University, Oregon State University, University of San Diego, and University of Virginia, among others.
- ² This article represents highlighted experiments from the course. It does not present an outline of the entire syllabus, which includes the study of related Asian traditions, and other traditions of Buddhism, including a full unit on Tibetan Buddhism.
- ³ One early formulation of this model appears in the *Dīgha Nikāya* of the Pali Canon. It is also well known in Theravada traditions informed by Buddhaghosa and Tibetan traditions influenced by Vasubhandu (Adam 2006, 82n19).
- ⁴ Geshe Sopa, one of the earliest academic professors of Tibetan Buddhism, is also a traditional Tibetan scholar, at one of the earliest academic programs in Buddhist Studies, University of Wisconsin, Madison.
- ⁵ This more traditional approach to Tibetan Buddhism is further developed in our unit on Tibetan rituals, including mandala creation, and rituals for addressing death and dying.
- ⁶ Reflecting on suffering may be challenging and introduce the possibility of re-traumatizing individuals in the class. Working with trauma informed principles (Knight 2015, p. 16) can make such a possibility less likely and actually empower students to better understand the process of their own suffering without becoming overwhelmed. I have found that briefly mentioning topics that may be too overwhelming or difficult to address, such as the effects of racism, abuse, or COVID-19, has the benefit of confirming the reality and prevalence of such experiences, while at the same time focusing students on strategies that empower them to make

choices about the assignment that make it more manageable and achievable. Students who feel grounded and supported in this way are more able to begin the process of addressing the impact of past experience on present suffering. This prepares them to consider Buddhist ways of thinking about and addressing how suffering arises in their experience so that they may gain insights on Buddhist approaches for not only stopping suffering completely but managing it in practical ways.

7 Goenka, an Indian teacher from Myanmar, founded this modern form of Vipassana practiced on ten-day retreats. He considers it to be a pure, “non-sectarian” form of the Buddha’s teachings.

8 We review the more traditional forms of South East Asian Buddhism and Ch’an from which Hanh derives his unique approach and which at least a few students in the Cambodian and Vietnamese Buddhist communities of Philadelphia have personal experience. These include students who come from Buddhist backgrounds about which they are curious, since family traditions have often been abandoned or blurred by political strife. Recommended readings, including Hanh’s own explanations of the traditional approaches he has challenged or developed, are available for those who are interested in investigating these forms of Buddhism in a final project.

9 A discussion of traditional Korean Son, together with the adaptations of the Kwan Um school, as well as distinct forms of Japanese Zen and related East Asian practices, develops through readings in Gethin and Keon. Opportunities for further study are introduced as above.

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