



Teaching Buddhism: New Insights on Understanding and Presenting the Traditions

Lewis, Todd; and DeAngelis, Gary, eds.
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Book Review

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The contributors to this volume of the AAR Teaching Religious Studies series take different approaches to writing about teaching Buddhism. As the subtitle suggests, many of the essays focus on bringing teachers up-to-date on recent developments in scholarship. In their preface, the editors propose that the volume can be used “to revisit some of the key frontiers of knowledge in Buddhist studies, new arenas of study and application, and numerous topics that [instructors] should certainly revise in their presentations to students” (xiv). The volume thus endorses the idea that good teaching depends on familiarity with the best and most current scholarship in the field. There is little interaction with the extensive scholarship of teaching and learning.

Throughout the book more emphasis is put on what teachers themselves need to learn than on how they can present that material to students. The contrast is sometimes striking. In the final section on Buddhism in new academic fields, for example, the interesting essay on the history of Buddhist-Christian dialogue only broaches the topic of teaching with a short list of “recommended course books,” without any commentary, after the bibliography of references used in the essay (see 294-5). But the next essay, on teaching Buddhist bioethics, follows a brief adumbration of the field with a detailed analysis of a particular course on that topic, including a clear delineation of learning goals, analysis of a particular case study on abortion that features a detailed scenario that can be used in class, a list of pedagogical considerations for such a course, and a brief annotated bibliography of resources.

Readers will need to use this volume in different ways. Although it appears to be aimed primarily at teachers who have already devoted substantial effort to the study of Buddhism,

many authors point out intersections with other academic fields, including ethics, environmental studies, economics, politics, gender studies, and philosophy. Three essays address Buddhism and the American context, with Charles Prebish offering a succinct history of the expansion of that sub-field and the concomitant growth of resources appropriate for the classroom. One essay, by Gary DeAngelis, focuses on teaching about Buddhism in the World Religions course, which, despite the persuasive critiques levelled at the concept, is still one of the most widely taught religion courses for undergraduates.

Two essays offer distinctive takes on the familiar insider-outsider problem. Jan Willis offers a compelling account of teaching about Buddhism as a Buddhist scholar-practitioner, including sample assignments and her Buddhist rationales for them (155). She also notes the negative perceptions of her standing as a “real” scholar caused by her religious commitments. Rita Gross explores the flip side of that situation, recounting the resistance to her introduction of academic understandings of Buddhist history into her work as a dharma teacher for Buddhist students at a meditation center.

Teaching Buddhism offers a rich array of resources for teachers, along with some specific suggestions about how to use those resources effectively in the classroom.

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