

Unlearning: Buddhism and the Public Understanding of Buddhism: The Print Media and the Public Understanding of Buddhism

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ABSTRACT

This paper focusses on two popular book projects that sought to communicate Buddhism's variety and complexity to non-specialists. The first emerged from a radio series that the author was asked to write and present for the BBC World Service in the mid-1990s, entitled *The Way of the Buddha*. A book from the series followed, published by Oneworld. The second was an edited book that also slotted into a series, published by Equinox - *Buddhism in 5 Minutes*. The paper is an exercise in self-reflexivity, in the context of two demands that are placed on academics within religious studies. The first of these is the government's insistence that academic research should have an impact on 'the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life'. The second is the lack of religious literacy within society and the demands placed on academics working within religious studies to address it. This short paper will, therefore, concentrate on the aims, method, structure and content of each book in the light of these demands. It will also explore the potential of such projects and the issues they raise for the discipline of religious studies and our role as academics.

KEYWORDS

Buddhism, Public Understanding, Print Media, *Buddhism in 5 Minutes*, BBC World Service, Oneworld

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Introduction

This paper focusses on two popular book projects that sought to communicate Buddhism's variety and complexity to non-specialists.¹ The first emerged from a radio series that I was asked to write and present for the BBC World Service in the mid-1990s, entitled *The Way of the Buddha*. A book from the series followed, published by Oneworld, in which I sought to represent Buddhism through the interviews carried out for the radio programmes (Harris, 1998). Since it slotted into a Oneworld series, the name had to be changed to the less than satisfactory, from a religious studies perspective: *What Buddhists Believe*. The second was an edited book that also slotted into a series, this time published by Equinox - *Buddhism in 5 Minutes* (Harris, 2021). The Management Committee of the UK Association for Buddhist Studies (UKABS) asked me to edit it, after Equinox had requested the Committee to contribute a volume on Buddhism to the series. Both books targeted the non-academic market, whilst also recognising that undergraduates might find them useful.

What follows is not an academic critique of the quality of these publications. That would need a reviewer external to the projects. I would like to characterise my words as an exercise in self-reflexivity, in the context of two demands that are placed on academics within religious studies. The first of these is the government's insistence that academic research should have an impact on 'the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life', to quote the assessment criteria issued before the 2021 Research Excellence Framework exercise. The second is the more difficult to pin down lack of religious literacy within society and the demands placed on academics working within religious studies to address it. This short paper will, therefore, concentrate on the aims, method, structure and content of each book in the light of these demands. I will then explore the potential of such projects and the issues they raise for the discipline of religious studies and our role as academics.

The Way of the Buddha/What do Buddhists believe?

The aim of the radio series, *The Way of the Buddha*, was to represent Buddhism accurately as a lived and internally diverse religion that has agency within the social fabric and political landscapes of many countries. Buddhist beliefs formed part of this but was not the sole focus, in spite of the unfortunate title of the book that followed the broadcasts. The BBC producer of the series, David Craig, was keen to challenge a view that, at that time, was present within the BBC, namely that religion was not relevant to politics and social issues. The method David Craig and I used was to interview Buddhist practitioners and social activists in Cambodia, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Britain. These countries were chosen by Craig not only to keep us within the budget for the series but also because he wanted us to engage with countries at the forefront of world events. The lacuna was that we did not travel to Mahāyāna countries. When I suggested we should carry out interviews in Japan, I was told there was no money for this. Mahāyāna voices were included through interviews with western Zen practitioners, and with western converts to Buddhism and their Tibetan teachers at Kagyu Samye Ling Monastery and Tibetan Centre on the borders of Scotland.

¹ This paper formed part of a panel offered by the UK Association for Buddhist Studies at the 2022 Annual conference of the BASR and should be read together with the other papers in the panel, to which a forward has been written by Dr Nick Swann.

Financial concerns, therefore, determined the level of diversity within the radio series and the book.

The book contained six chapters that corresponded to the six programmes – the series had five and Craig asked me to do one more on Buddhism and Women, under another heading within the religious programming of the World Service. In parallel with the programmes, the book entitled these: The Buddha: Teacher of Gods and Humans; What the Buddha Taught; Meditation: The Way to Enlightenment; Buddhism and Social Engagement; Women in Buddhism; Challenging and Reinforcing Culture. Participants in the radio programmes were asked what name they wanted the BBC to use on air. For the book, they were asked if we could use the same name in print. The majority agreed. Anonymity was guaranteed for those who preferred not to be named.

I will illustrate the content through three of the chapters of the book, beginning with the third, on meditation. At the outset, socially engaged Buddhists in Thailand and Cambodia shared that they practised meditation in order to make their activism more effective. The chapter then passed to teachers of meditation in Thailand, Sri Lanka and Samye Ling Monastery in Scotland, who explained the aim of meditation. Ven. Professor Dhammavihari (formerly Professor Jotiya Dhirasekera) in Sri Lanka put it this way:

Bhāvanā [meditation] should not be the mere ability to fix your mind on the bulb that is burning on the ceiling or the glow of a light on the wall, but it is to know that you have gradually peeled off the stains of contamination in your mind – conflict, ill-will, jealousy, rivalry. It is a question of how clean your inside is. (Harris, 1998: 68)

The chapter then moved to different forms of meditation, beginning with *samatha* – tranquillity meditation. A very popular Sri Lankan meditation teacher at the time, Mithra Wettimuny, spoke at length about what one should do when the mind wanders in this form of meditation. Insight meditation came next and then Zen practice, illustrated through a lengthy interview with a western teacher of Zen, Beth Goldering. The next topic was loving kindness meditation and the developing of compassion, before the chapter passed to the use of visualisation and mantras in different forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Meditation was presented as a hard path that encompassed diverse methods and aimed at more than personal wellbeing.

The chapter on Buddhism and Social Engagement began with an interview with Sulak Sivaraksa (b. 1933) in Thailand – the co-founder of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists. He stated that the genesis of the Network lay partly in the dismay he had felt when, as a student in the west, he had found that Buddhism was being marketed as a path of personal transformation only. In this context, he shared an engaged, non-individualistic perspective on the Five Precepts:

In today's society, to observe the Precept not to harm living beings must involve challenging the arms trade, the army and the navy. All of them are breaking the second Precept also. The money used on arms is stolen from the taxpayer's money, which should be used for such things as health care. (Harris, 1998: 100)

A framework for engaged Buddhism was then offered through interviews with Buddhists in all the countries we travelled to, including Professor Asanga Tilakaratne and Raja Dharmapala in Sri Lanka, Venerable Santikaro and Phra Paisan Wisalo in

Thailand, and Ringu Tulku, internationally known Tibetan teacher who was visiting Samye Ling when we visited. One question that we paid particular attention to was whether the emphasis on 'detachment' in Buddhism was compatible with social engagement. All our informants/interviewees stressed that the two were inseparable. Phra Paisan Wisalo, for instance, stated:

There are two aspects of the Buddha's teaching. The first is to act intelligently, the exterior act. The second is to enlighten your mind. To be detached is to be free from hatred, greed and delusion. It doesn't mean that we should refrain from action, that we shouldn't do anything. (Harris, 1998: 105)

The Mahāyāna Buddhists we interviewed stressed the concept of interdependence as key to compassionate social action, whilst monks such as Paisan Wisalo placed social action in the context of traditional village relationships in Thailand, where 'monks and temples have had a social role for many centuries' (Harris, 1998: 108). The programme and the chapter then moved to three case studies: war and violence, using Sri Lanka and Cambodia as illustrations; social development and ecological awareness; humanitarian aid. In connection with the first, we interviewed Mahā Ghosānanda (1913–2007) and Buddhists in Cambodia who were working with him, all of whom could remember the Khmer Rouge period from 1975–1979 and its aftermath. In Sri Lanka, we featured Buddhist monks such as Ven. Vavuniya Wimalasara, who had worked in Tamil-majority areas of the country and were known to have intervened to defuse inter-ethnic tension. Neither the programme nor the chapter hid differences of opinion among Buddhists concerning social involvement, for instance on whether the role of a Buddhist monk was to stimulate interest in ecological issues such as deforestation through sermons or to go into threatened forests for direct action.

My third example is the last radio programme and the last chapter, which the book entitled 'Challenging and Reinforcing Culture'. It focussed on what challenges Buddhists were giving to traditional Buddhist societies and the west (Harris, 1998:159). Whether Buddhism could be seen as a missionary religion came first with the majority of those interviewed stressing that it was the Buddha's teaching that was most important, not whether one labelled oneself as Buddhist or not. The chapter then passed to Cambodia and how Buddhists were seeking to revitalise society and Buddhist identities after the trauma of the 1970s, within a context where some preferred the path of violence and revenge. Some truly inspirational people contributed, such as Mr Chheng Pon, a former Minister of Culture, who, during the Khmer Rouge period, had been forced to drive a bullock cart. When we interviewed him, he was running the Vipassanā Centre for Culture and Meditation, which sought to 'encourage the creative springs of Cambodian culture to flow again' (Harris, 1998: 165). He said to us, 'I believe that culture and Buddhism are essential energy, a life cement in order to glue the political parties together. I hope for the future that the *Dhamma* will help us to develop the country' (Harris, 1998: 166).

The challenge that Buddhism could offer to globalised consumerism and individualism was a recurrent theme within the chapter and indeed the programme. For instance, engaged Buddhist, Pracha Hutanaawatr in Thailand recognised that many within the younger generation were 'fed up with Buddhism'. He had been himself, when younger. Buddhism itself was being challenged and had to offer a challenge in return, one that was relevant to both politics and societal challenges. Sulak Sivaraksa pointed to the Buddhist concept of generosity (*dāna*) as a challenge to consumerism and Mithra

Wettimuny in Sri Lanka, to the 'ten royal qualities' that the Buddha recommended to monarchs. The last of these, 'the avoidance of conflict', ensured, according to Wettimuny, 'the highest form of democracy. A person who practises this quality permits freedom of expression, never uses power to suppress, loves that freedom and encourages it to bring about ideas, opinions or alternative viewpoints' (Harris, 1998, 173).

The programme then turned to the west and the stories of converts to Buddhism. We included conversion narratives from westerners practising within Theravāda traditions, Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, 'ecumenical' Buddhism and what is now the Triratna Community. Their stories demonstrated that there was no single path into Buddhism in the twentieth century. Asanga Tilakaratne then offered an Asian perspective on this diversity. Lastly the programme examined the challenges faced by Buddhists in the west, with a focus on the conservation and adaptation of Buddhist traditions. It took the English Sangha Trust, Kagyu Samye Ling and the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (now the Triratna community) as examples and probed the extent to which western Buddhism has diverged from Asian traditions. For instance, Dhammacarini Sanghadevi of the Triratna Community explained:

[w]e incorporate three traditions within our Order – Theravāda, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna. We draw on teachings from the Pāli Canon, Mahāyāna Sutras and Vajrayāna texts. We teach people the mindfulness of breathing, *satipaṭṭhāna*, popular in Theravāda Buddhism, and *mettā bhāvanā*, the meditation on loving kindness. Those are the two meditations which everyone learns when they come along to our movement. Our *puja*, our devotional practice is drawn from the Mahāyāna tradition. When people enter the Order, they are given a further meditation practice which is taken from the Mahāyāna-cum-Vajrayāna tradition. In the same way with the texts we study, we bring our teachings from the different traditions (Harris, 1998:188).

Buddhism in Five Minutes

The aim of *Buddhism in Five Minutes* was to communicate accurate information about Buddhism to the non-specialist, those with a romantic interest in the tradition and students beginning their religious studies journey. Held within this was the contesting of stereotypes rooted in orientalist and populist representations of Buddhism. Technical terms and footnotes had to be kept to a minimum, in line with the wider series. Additionally, the style of writing had to be accessible, even conversational, attracting general readers rather than alienating them through unnecessary jargon.

To set the project up, members of the Management Board of UKABS first brought together over 70 questions, which they knew from their own experience that non-specialists and undergraduate students were asking about Buddhism. Then, members of UKABS were asked to volunteer to write answers of between 1000 and 1,500 words to one or more of the questions. In terms of word-count, there were a few exceptions for questions that invited greater flexibility. Lastly, I, as editor, sought to create internal consistency between the submissions in terms of style, content and accessibility. This involved far more correspondence with contributors than I could ever have imagined – tutoring those who were new to writing, toning down contributions that were too dense or opaque, and making sure that the limited number of technical terms included

were consistent and also that no contradictory statements were made about Buddhism. As the project developed, a couple of submitted answers had to be rejected and new questions were added. New authors were also sought, when we realised that we did not have a good enough balance between western and Asian scholars.

The questions were divided into 11 sections: Buddhism as a religion; The Buddha; What the Buddha Taught (1); What the Buddha Taught (2) – Meditation; Monasticism and Lay People in Buddhism; Development of Buddhism – Mahayana and Vajrayana; Buddhist art and material culture; Buddhism and other religions; Buddhism and ethics; Buddhism and contemporary issues; Emergent Buddhism. The questions within these sections included:

- Who is the fat Buddha figure?
- Do Buddhists see all that happens to one as due to karma?
- What is nirvana?
- Does Buddhism support gender equality?
- Is Tantric Buddhism just about sex?
- Are Buddhists pacifist?
- What do Buddhists think about those who are LGBTQI?
- What does Buddhism have to say about race?

To take three of these, Paulina Kolata gently pointed out in her answer to ‘Who is the fat Buddha figure?’ that this image was not ‘a more rotund version of Gautama Buddha himself’ but a ‘semi-historical, popular, non-canonical figure, derived from Chinese folklore, who became incorporated into the Chan (Zen in Japan) tradition’ (Kolata, 2021: 60). She went on to explain that he could have been modelled on ‘Qici’ - an eccentric Chinese Zen monk of the tenth century, who carried around a cloth bag that, ‘according to the legends, contained sweets for children and rice plants for the poor’ (Kolata, 2021, 61). In answer to ‘Are Buddhists pacifist?’ Peter Harvey stressed that, although non-violence was the ideal in Buddhist traditions, ‘Buddhists vary in the extent to which they live at this level’ (Harvey, 2021: 284). Moving between texts and different geographical contexts, he painted a complex picture, addressing the recent scholarly interest in violence within majority Buddhist countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Japan. He ended with, ‘So, while Buddhist ideals are certainly non-violent, and many have stood up for this and worked for peace, the urge to protect others, and sometimes lesser motives have also led Buddhists to take part in armed conflict’ (Harvey, 2021: 287). Lastly, Tim Stephens, addressing, ‘What does Buddhism have to say about race?’, began with his own experience of racism as a child as someone with ‘one parent from India and one from England’ and then outlined a Buddhist textual perspective, namely that the differences between humans are nominal. He then recognised that Buddhists had been guilty of racism in practice. He pointed to studies that had demonstrated that black and other minority heritage people had not always found ‘modern Western convert Buddhist communities either welcoming or open to hearing about their experiences’ (Stephens, 2021: 348), before celebrating that:

We may be witnessing a new Buddhist-informed practice, born of this distinctive suffering [from racism], addressing racial inequality without succumbing to the “illusions” of race, and with the aims of “equality” and “community building,” radically liberating Buddhism itself. (Stephens, 2021: 350)

My introduction to the book stressed that the book need not be read from beginning to end. A reader could choose a question that was of interest and move outwards from it, using the suggestions for further reading at the end of each answer, which included other answers in the book and external sources. For instance, at the end of the answer to 'What is a bodhisattva?' written by Jiansheng Shi (Shi, 2021: 63–67), readers were pointed towards: 'How is the nature of Buddhahood to be understood?', 'What is the bodhisattva vow?' and 'Why are there so many different celestial beings in Tibetan Buddhism?' This cross-referencing method created webs of answers that supported and illuminated each other (Harris, 2021: 1). No single answer offered everything one needed to know about 'how Buddhists practice and live their religion'. Readers would need to 'move from section to section, question to question' (Harris, 2021: 1).

Differences between the two projects

The differences between the two projects were mainly perspectival and directional. *What Buddhists Believe* emphasised the self-definition of practitioners in a limited number of contexts that were determined by financial rather than theoretical considerations. The raw data gained from the interviews were then mediated through me, in conversation with a BBC producer, whose agenda was determined by his conviction that the radio programmes should present Buddhism as a diverse religion that was relevant to the contemporary world. The questions we asked our interviewees did not, therefore, arise from a position of neutrality or methodological agnosticism. They were conditioned by the aims of the radio series, the situatedness of both David Craig and myself, an aspiration towards empathy and a recognition of complexity within Buddhist traditions. In addition, our choice of Buddhists to interview was informed by the relationships that I had built up with Buddhists in Asia over a period of ten years and the networks surrounding these relationships. Each interview we carried out was contextually grounded and these contexts were not hidden, either in the radio programmes or the book. Generally speaking, however, the directional framework of the programmes was from lived religion on the ground upwards, through the mediating lens of religious studies and media specialists, whose perspectives on religion were key to the end product.

Buddhism in 5 Minutes, on the other hand, was structured and written by specialists within the discipline of Buddhist Studies, some of whom were also practitioners and teachers of meditation. Underpinning the writing was experience of what non-specialists were asking about Buddhism but mediated through the concerns of these specialists. Although the contributors possessed considerable experience of lived Buddhism in Asia and the west, the directional emphasis of the book was from the academic downwards towards the non-specialist and practitioners who wished to learn more about the diversity of their own tradition.

Uniting the two books, however, was the wish to contest stereotypes and misunderstandings of Buddhist traditions through offering accurate information in an established religious studies tradition (e.g. Bowman, 2004). In the first publication, the challenges were mounted by Buddhists in Asia and the west, some of whom were working in contexts of war and social disruption. In the second, the challenges came from academic research, informed by lived Buddhism in Asia.

The potential of such projects for the understanding of Buddhism and other religions in the public square

I would argue that the potential of publication projects such as the two that I have outlined is considerable. For instance, a recent report written by the government Faith Engagement Advisor, 'Does government "do God"? An independent review into how government engages with faith' recommended improvement in faith literacy for all public sector staff (Bloom, 2023). Publications such as these could feed into making this recommendation a reality. Religious studies specialists can and, I believe, should contribute in this way to ensure accuracy and to increase the impact of our work, although there are methodological considerations that I touch on in the next section. Ensuring such accuracy in the public understanding of religions involves at least three elements.

The first is ensuring religions are represented as diverse, complex and dynamic entities that do not open to one key. The contexts covered in *What Buddhists Believe* from the capitalistic, consumerist culture of Bangkok to Kagyu Samye Ling monastery in the Scottish Borders were deliberately diverse, politically and geographically, although not as diverse as I would have liked. The questions tackled in *Buddhism in 5 Minutes* covered not only belief but history, devotion, ritual, ethics, material culture, narrative, politics, economics, social engagement, racism and gender. In addition, in both publications, care was taken to eschew reified representations of Buddhism that deny the ambiguities that arise when real people try to live out their faith in difficult situations.

The second is the decolonisation of representations of religion. In the case of Buddhism, the tradition continues to be represented in schools and other educational settings, and the media through orientalist lenses that have prioritised doctrine and a limited number of texts rather than devotion, narrative, performance, the esoteric and socio-political engagement. The two books I have covered, particularly the first, succeeded, at least partially, in allowing space for alterity and narratives that escaped orientalist frameworks more than many popular representations.

The third involves challenging the ideologically-driven secularist assumption that religion is located, lived and interpreted only within the private domain. The radicalisation of young people within some religious traditions and the religious nationalism that is seen in countries such as Sri Lanka and India are puncturing this assumption but have not destroyed it. Religious studies specialists are ideally placed to raise this challenge through the empiricism that is central to religious studies. Although Linda Woodhead's analysis of religion in British society has rightly pointed out that self-expression has become a moral good, a live your life rather than a give your life ethos (e.g. Woodhead, 2021), this is only one frame of reference for religion in the contemporary world. The promotion of religious literacy involves engaging with the complexity that religion injects into both the private and public domains.

Questions raised for the discipline of religious studies

Although I have argued that the religious studies specialist should have a role in aiding religious literacy in the public square – the public understanding of religion - I recognise that this raises questions such as the following:

Should religious studies specialists become part of the ongoing re-calibration of religion in global communities or situate themselves as analysts and observers of what is going on?

Is it the role of religious studies to counter stereotypes of religion or to theorise why these stereotypes arise?

To what extent is the role of the religious studies specialist to shatter comforting stereotypes, for example that all Buddhists are pacifist or that all Buddhists meditate, when some westerners need Buddhism to be a symbol of peace and wellbeing?

At the heart of these questions is whether the discipline should observe what is happening in religious landscapes or take some form of responsibility within these landscapes. It is an issue that goes back to the beginnings of religious studies, with its emphasis on phenomenology, the authority of the believer and methodological agnosticism. Several decades ago, scholars such as Gavin Flood pulled the rug from under the latter, by stressing, for instance, that representation is always interpretation. Religious studies specialists were re-calibrating religion through their representations, whether they wished to or not. Their interventions were conditioned (Flood, 1999; Cox, 2006: 211–216). Taking this into account, I would argue, therefore, for a both/and mentality. The discipline of religious studies should both analyse why stereotypes of religion arise and contest them with accurate data. Those working within the field should see themselves both as analysts of religious change and as having responsibility to intervene when misconceptions about religions lead to consequences detrimental to society. When reified and inaccurate portrayals of Islamic or Jewish traditions, for example, lead to racism and discrimination, religious studies specialists should step into the public square. The publication projects that are the focus of this short paper were just one small part of this type of engagement.

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