

Introduction: Unlearning: Buddhism and the Public Understanding of Buddhism

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SECTION INTRODUCTION

Those of us who study religions often encounter misunderstandings, half-truths, and outright errors in the public understanding of our specialist areas. These can be relatively benign and inconsequential – “The Buddha was a Prince,” “The Buddha was fat and jolly,” – but sometimes they are more significant and can hinder the understanding of world events – “Buddhism is always peaceful.” In the case of Buddhism in the UK these misunderstandings often have their roots in colonial encounters with non-Abrahamic religions, where exoticised images found their way into print and other media and thereby into the public consciousness. Furthermore, self-appointed spokespeople of Buddhism were quick to plant their own interpretations of Buddhist thought as what the Buddha “really meant.”

Whatever the origin or religion, these misunderstandings often have considerable traction. As specialists hopefully we feel a sense of professional responsibility to engage with the public and present our subject in the most accurate light that current understanding has to offer.

So, what are we doing and what can we do?

The above text is taken from the abstract for a panel titled ‘Unlearning: Education and the public understanding of Buddhism’ presented by the UK Association for Buddhist Studies for BASR’s 2022 conference on Religion and Public Engagement. This subsection of *JBASR* features three papers from the panel concerning the interface between specialist and non-specialist understandings of Buddhism. Two are reflections on the thought processes and considerations that go into presenting Buddhist thought and practice to the wider public. Vishvapani Blomfield reflects on presenting a Buddhist understanding of current affairs on ‘Thought for the Day’ on BBC Radio 4’s Today Programme. Elizabeth Harris reflects on writing *What Buddhists*

Believe and on editing *Buddhism in Five Minutes*, both works being aimed at a non-specialist readership. While these two may be atypical of the papers found in an academic journal, they are informative and insightful, and will be of interest to anyone involved in the public understanding of religion. The third paper, by Nick Swann, is more typically academic and considers how 'soft' decoloniality contributes to global cognitive justice, specifically in the context of the decolonising of the displays in the Buddhist Room at the small, independent, museum at Chiddingstone Castle, Kent.