

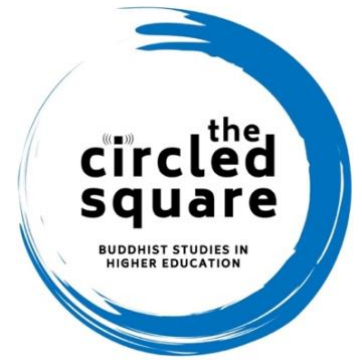
## Todd Lewis: Social Context and the Power of Imagination

File Length: 1 hr 11 min

### SPEAKERS

Todd – Todd Lewis

Sarah – Richardson



### FULL TRANSCRIPT (with timecode)

00:00:00:27 - 00:00:10:00

**Todd:** What I tell them at the start of the course is that your job is to think through Buddhist doctrine, to think like a Buddhist as much as you can.

00:00:10:23 - 00:01:01:15

**Sarah:** Hello and welcome to this episode of The Circled Square, the podcast where we talk about teaching Buddhist studies in higher education. I'm Sarah Richardson, and I teach at the University of Toronto. In this episode, I sat down with Dr. Todd Lewis. He's a distinguished professor of arts and humanities and a professor of world religions at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts. Dr. Lewis has had a long and distinguished career, and he's particularly interested in teaching his students about Buddhism in a social context, making sure that they understand that Buddhism was not just the purview of a specialist group like monks and nuns, but is formed by and in many communities. He has a real interest in art and ritual and finds really innovative ways of sharing those with students. In this podcast, we talk about diagrams and films and all manner of ways he's found to make this subject alive. Please enjoy.

00:01:04:15 - 00:01:06:23

**Sarah:** Hello, Professor Lewis, thanks so much for being here.

00:01:07:06 - 00:01:12:18

**Todd:** It's my pleasure, thank you for inviting me, and I'm looking forward to talking to an art historian.

00:01:13:28 - 00:01:43:16

**Sarah:** Well, we wanted to talk today about your teaching. So as part of our research for this interview, we looked at your recent course syllabus, your intro to Buddhism course that you're just finishing teaching from this fall 2020. Fall 2020, of course, was an unusual term for many of us. I wanted to ask you first how your intro to Buddhism course this past term changed from previous incarnations?

00:01:44:12 - 00:02:49:23

**Todd:** Holy Cross decided to be all remote, so it meant students are scattered all over the country and all of the world. In fact, I have four Chinese students in that class who are scattered over China – Xi'an, Beijing, Shanghai. I have forty eight students, it's a popular class at Holy Cross and I was teaching the same course in the Spring. So what I decided to do a couple of years ago was to organize my class with a two hour lecture once a week, a plenary lecture, and then have small breakout discussion groups later in the week. So what that meant was that I recorded my lectures on a recording platform and then had students view them when they wanted to or when they could, and then had live discussion sections via Zoom for groups of 15 to 18 students.

00:02:49:27 - 00:02:54:14

**Sarah:** Ok, and a popular class means how many students, exactly?

00:02:55:08 - 00:03:53:02

**Todd:** In the spring, I had almost 50. I think I had 50 in the spring and 48 this semester. So I teach at a Jesuit Catholic college with a student population of about 2800. So my course satisfies a cross-cultural studies core requirement, but I get a lot of students who are sort of disaffected Catholics who are interested in something else, or curious minds. Holy Cross is a modern liberal arts college, half of our students are Catholic, but it's not in any way... The religion requirement is just take a religion course, including my Buddhism course. So there's no difficult assignment in taking it.

00:03:53:23 - 00:04:00:24

**Todd:** I sent you the screen and I tell my students, that's the most important screen of the semester.

00:04:00:27 - 00:04:08:25

**Sarah:** OK, you're going to need to describe it and explain it, but we can put it on the website. First of all, it's a graphic that you've produced, I guess?

00:04:09:09 - 00:05:12:06

**Todd:** Yes. This is basically an explanation of the Eightfold Path, and it's organized according to the schema of the great Sri Lankan scholar Buddhaghosa, who divides the path to nirvana in terms of three stages. One is morality, the second is meditation, and the third is prajna, and the perfection of prajna equals nirvana or enlightenment realization. So the Eightfold Path can be organized in this way I think fruitfully, and it more or less conforms to what other Buddhist thinkers, including Mahayana scholars such as Shantideva, described in slightly different language. Mahayana with the paramitas, but still, the perfection of prajna is the end of the Buddhist path with the realization of nirvana, that's true.

00:05:12:19 - 00:05:28:10

**Sarah:** Right. Then in this yellow diagram you've got morality, meditation, prajna aligned with elements from the Eightfold Path. But below that, this "percentage of population line", what does that mean?

00:05:28:14 - 00:06:52:15

**Todd:** OK, so now we get to the bell curve. I've written about how I think the bell curve is essential for studying all religions. There are really dedicated followers who may become monks and nuns, in the case of Buddhism, and there are people who barely show up or don't show up or who don't even believe this stuff unless they're pressed on the other tail of that. Then you have people in the middle, and every religion in every place can maybe be filled out in terms of the way these are specifically fulfilled. The bell curve may be shaped differently for different places in the Buddhist world or different religions. It's such a basic idea, but it's also very essential sociological imagination. You can't essentialize Buddhism as any part of that bell curve. So what's at the bottom of that illustration is that 95% of Buddhists are really concerned with the morality, that is of being good people and avoiding making bad karma, and then making merit so that in the future of this life and in future lifetimes, you improve your position eventually to be able to have the capacity to practice meditation and then realize the fruits of meditation.

00:06:52:26 - 00:06:58:14

**Sarah:** And that meditation number is small still, though, 4.99%, you've got there.

00:06:59:00 - 00:08:10:06

**Todd:** So it is true that in modern times, meditation has been democratized across the Buddhist world and so there may be more people who do meditation and householders that engage in meditation. But the key point here and the takeaway is that 95% of Buddhists, it's not hard to understand them. It is basically be a good person. That is the Dharma. And you follow the five precepts and you are generous in supporting the Sangha and you donate to charities and you do rituals because that's the way you make karma, that's where you make merit. And so in some ways, Buddhism is not hard. It's not mysterious. It is true that the Dharma has taken a long, many, many routes and many explanations, many schools, Nagarjuna, consciousness only, tantra, the Six Yogis of Naropa, on and on it goes. And that's for the 5% of the people who are engaged on that level of intensity. But many typical Buddhists, it's not hard.

00:08:11:17 - 00:08:22:15

**Sarah:** Right. So then also for 95% of the population, they're really only feeling responsible to the first three parts of the path, right speech, right action, right livelihood?

00:08:23:08 - 00:09:26:22

**Todd:** They respect the rest and they are responsible to support those who can go further, and that's beautiful. This is another sociological idea, all social life is based on exchange. So the householders are expected to and earn merit for supporting the virtuosos among them. Within this diagram also is the fact that not all monks are virtuoso meditators. In fact, at times, if you follow the work of Gregory Schopen in this, you wonder how low the number of really serious practicing spiritual monks there were, because they were also involved in managing the monastic grounds of the warehouses where they stored things for merchants, and all kinds of other activities that fully developed Indian monastic Buddhism undertook. So that's what I think when I explain that diagram.

00:09:27:19 - 00:09:39:08

**Sarah:** Yeah, very cool. So this diagram, how does it support your teaching? Like you said you use this in classes? How do you use this in classes and how does it support your teaching with students?

00:09:39:11 - 00:10:41:12

**Todd:** Ok, so I want to provide a context for the different teachings that are part of the Dharma, I want to provide a social context so that Buddhism doesn't just float out in our imaginations as something that exists without being grounded in particular places and times, and I'm very confident that in almost every place in Buddhist history as well as today that this pattern obtains. Now, in Tibet, 20% of men were monks, but they even had more diversity in the monastery with figures such as the warrior monks who were like the policemen in these huge monasteries that existed. So that's a bit of an outlier in terms of the size of the sangha, and I wish we could go back and do censuses and figure out how many monks there really were percentage wise. That's a guess, but I think it's pretty accurate.

00:10:41:17 - 00:11:02:04

**Sarah:** Yeah. So this is fascinating, this resonates with me a lot. Thank you. And this is something that's kind of a theme in your work. You've been publishing and talking about this idea for a long time, that we need to really study the humanity of Buddhists, not the selected experiences of just a few, like of a tiny slice of the virtuosic Buddhist practitioners.

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**Todd:** That's exactly right.

00:11:04:06 - 00:11:16:21

**Sarah:** Yeah. So what's required to do that? Like what focus do we need to have differently in our courses to make sure our students are being exposed to what you're calling the humanity of Buddhists?

00:11:17:22 - 00:12:20:07

**Todd:** So let me also say that I try to make students aware of what end of the bell curve they're in in terms of global literacy, intellectual capability, wealth, and freedom to study, and I'll acknowledge to them that we're not just going to spend 5% of the course time on the ways that Buddhists have philosophized. That's not what we're going to do, we're going to spend much more time with that. So we're going to disproportionately study the intellectuals and the philosophers. So I'm not downgrading that, I'm not neglecting that, but I am trying to have them read and describe and see rituals, and I want them to see how Buddhism is lived in different times and places, and it is through, Sarah, the art of Buddhism.

00:12:20:09 - 00:12:20:24

**Sarah:** Yeah!

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**Todd:** You can show this. This is prime evidence.

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**Sarah:** I agree.

00:12:26:16 - 00:12:29:25

**Todd:** I mean, I don't know if you've toured Sri Lanka very much, you being a Himalayan person...

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**Sarah:** I have not. India, Nepal, Tibet, but no Sri Lanka yet.

00:12:35:17 - 00:13:57:03

**Todd:** Sri Lankan temple paintings, monastery paintings, are an incredibly rich source of material showing ritual practices. So it's there on the walls as well as you can go in and document these rituals, and the tradition I spent most of my research life working on, which is very close to Tibet, but it's so different, they do some of the same rituals, Newar. The Newar's never had this scholastic thing that the Tibetan's had. Tibetans are outliers in this, really. I mean, the energy and the human manpower that went into translating and commenting on and commenting on the comments on, et cetera, et cetera in Tibet is extraordinary. So in some ways Tibet is a bit atypical, I think, in contemporary terms and in traditional terms. But just to get back to the original question, you need to show students Buddhists doing rituals. You need to show them gathering on full moon days and circumambulating stupas by the tens of thousands today.

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**Sarah:** And to show them, what do you do? What do you do to show them? You mean show them videos? Like how do you do this?

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**Todd:** That's why I made all these videos, that's why, to me, it was an essential pedagogic activity for me over the past 30 years, and I even got Smithsonian support when I was a grad student in Nepal, and they sent me cameramen and Arriflex cameras to shoot 16mm film as well. Now it's so much more fluid and easy. With cell phones you can take reasonable video.

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**Sarah:** Yeah, I mean you can find on YouTube sometimes too like a pilgrim video from last week of somebody circumambulating

00:14:44:27 - 00:15:12:03

**Todd:** That's right. So YouTube and Google images are like the old slide table and video deck that you used to be able to draw from. It needs to be curated to some extent because there's a lot a lot of silliness and imprecision in what's out there. But people in Asia are proud of their traditions so they're they're doing the documentary work for us in ways, you know? It's amazing.

00:15:13:12 - 00:15:42:13

**Sarah:** So in this introduction to Buddhism course that I will go back to talking about soon, you have them write a Buddhist art encounter paper. I'm really curious about that because I totally share your interest and perspective on Buddhist art as this really important lens for helping students encounter Buddhism as lived by many other people, and that was inclusive. So tell me about what you have them do in the Buddhist art encounter paper. Do you assign pieces of art to them or do they choose their own? How does that work?

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**Todd:** Yeah, they have to go out in the world and find it. It's a little bit of encouraging them to get to the Worcester Art Museum, which is one of the finest small city museums in the country. There are two galleries of Buddhist art and four or five pieces of art from Gandhara, for example. So it's ok, but I want them actually, if they can, to go to the Met or the MFA too, even better. But to see the art in person and to... Well, our art historians at Holy Cross like to talk about visual literacy, to describe it where it fits into a larger movement and look and sit and stay with the image. So they have to go for at least an hour and I encourage them to go twice because later in the semester as they learn more about Buddhism they can get more out of the image. It tends to be later in the semester because a lot of what's up there is Mahayana and you have to get to Mahayana before you can send them out to see the art itself.

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**Sarah:** When they're in this encounter, are the instructions to just sit with it for an hour or do they sketch or is there any kind of guidelines for them?

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**Todd:** Yeah I want them to document it, to sketch it if they feel like that. Actually, let's see. I took away that they have to sketch, but I encourage it and I encourage them to also look and think about the concept of "darshan", making eye contact with an image. It's a very Indic and Buddhist central part of the working nature of Buddhist art. But by the way, this also gives me a chance to do a little bit of riffing about museums and I also will show them usually on the day this is due, something like I want to show them what working images actually look like, how you can't tell what's in the arms or hands because they're covered with silk vestments and scarves, and they have flowers draped over their heads and people are throwing rice at the images. So museums are not the place to really understand the fullness of art, you have to see how it works and so I've made videos of this kind of thing as well. Then we can get into this, and I don't really want to get too sidetracked with the students, about how some of these museums actually got their art.

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**Sarah:** Though that's always really fascinating...

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**Todd:** But see, that's how we circle back to Orientalism, as it is at the end of the course. How did this get here? And I just want to plant that seed just to make them think about how this is the privilege we have. In Nepal... Actually, Dina Bangdel's father did a book on the stolen art of Nepal, where he had photographed the art that was then lost or stolen and missing. A whole thick coffee table book of stolen art. So I want them to be aware that this is also part of the legacy of colonialism and Orientalism.

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**Sarah:** Yeah, and it isn't over. There's still looted art circulating on the market now.

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**Todd:** Yeah, I helped the South Asian curator at the Met who came and was part of our exhibition, gave a lecture, to return some pieces of art back to Nepal. That's something that's going to be an ongoing aspect.

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**Todd:** That's a whole other subject that would come up in conversation sometimes because a number of the pieces we showed in our exhibition last fall, I actually knew all about their provenance and how they came to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. So I want students to see that these topics are not over and we all are part of this globalization and understanding, and Buddhism entails these kinds of interconnectedness, ideas that Buddhism itself has within.

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**Sarah:** Yeah, repatriation

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**Sarah:** Yeah. Alright, so you touched a little bit on this already, but let's circle back to this topic of Orientalism and the study of Buddhism from very early on in the course. So how do you introduce it and why do you introduce it?

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**Todd:** So I think the start of any religious studies course in any study of any world religion should, at least at the start, you sort of want to cleanse your palate, if you will. You want to make students aware and think about what their biases are as they enter in I think it's a good thing for them to think about this. So I have two kinds of categories of Orientalism that I've developed, as I've taught over the years. One is the critical Orientalism that dismisses or derogates or doesn't take seriously the religious ideas or the religious exemplars in that tradition. So there's a long tradition of depicting Asian sages as unserious men on mountaintops. This is the New Yorker cartoon sort of thing, where people go up and ask them questions and they turn out to be frauds or charlatans are not serious in their being gurus and being leaders of the Buddhist spiritual or Hindu spiritual tradition. So I want them to just see how all the ways that they may have seen Buddhism dismissed as something that's flaky or not to be taken seriously. So that's the dismissive side of Orientalism, but there also is this hyper-idealizing of Buddhism in which Buddhism is sort of accepted uncritically. It's sort of the Bob Thurman approach to Tibet. Everything was always beautiful all the time in every way, and don't say anything bad about Tibet.

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**Todd:** In fact, there's always a bell curve. Back to the bell curve... There's always a bell curve and there's exemplary people and they're real, terrible people, and there's everyone in between. So I want them to not take the hyper idealized presentation of Buddhism too, and to come in, in other words, to reset to being open minded. So I find that bringing that up, but I also want to circle around by the end of the course to come back to these issues, as I just illustrated with art, but also in other ways. When you talk about Buddhism today, the whole tradition almost everywhere in Asia was completely disrupted. The economic

systems that Buddhism depended on were interrupted or destroyed by colonialism. There were all kinds of ideological setbacks just being taken over by Europeans, and so much of Buddhism had to be rebuilt from the 19th century onward. So I want them to see how that rebuilding the so-called Protestant Buddhism that comes out of Sri Lanka and is passed to other places, that here we are again, right in this moment, still dealing with some of the distortions and the misconceptions and stereotypes that Westerners also brought to Buddhism.

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**Sarah:** And it's so hard because it's still shifting too, right. I mean the developments that 19th and early 20th century movements have given birth to are still tendrils working out in the world.

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**Todd:** And the question of who is legitimately preaching the Dharma today... There are important questions about legitimacy and authority. Asian Buddhists lost a lot of their agency to control the representation of their own tradition.

00:24:44:23 - 00:24:46:11

**Sarah:** You mean in America or globally?

00:24:46:13 - 00:25:19:24

**Todd:** I mean globally, but especially in North America, in Europe. I think we have people interpreting Buddhism and making authoritative statements about what the Buddha taught, that there are some problematic aspects to that. I don't really get into that, I just want students to leave the course critical and attuned to the issues that as they encounter Buddhists for the rest of their lives, they will have a have a sense of that.

00:25:20:06 - 00:26:10:20

**Sarah:** Yeah. I'm wondering since you've been teaching a while, which of these two forms of Orientalism do you think holds greater sway now over your students? Like do you find in the classrooms that now in 2020, more of your students are coming in with a lot of this hyper idealizing of Buddhism still active in their imagination? Because there's now such a current culture around like mindfulness programs on the cover of Time magazine or in public schools, in a lot of places in North America anyway. And so do you think there's more of that hyper idealizing or do you think that the students now, the younger students we have, are also still affected by this dismissive Orientalism you called it?

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**Todd:** Well, in my classroom I find students are very eager and that dismissive thing on Buddhism isn't the problem. On Islam, the same same set of students have enduring skepticism even after an introductory course. I guess what I am resisting and want them to be aware of are two stereotypes about Buddhism that can be reinforced by Western Buddhist institutions. One is the statement that Buddhism is just a philosophy, and there's nobody coming out of my course who is going to see that, and I love the beat on that drum, so I show them how much the Buddhist life for householders is ritual, daily ritual, lunar calendar based ritual, going to the monastery. At the end of it I think they get a case study in how Western stereotypes of others turns out to be idiotic. But then Buddhism simply as a therapy or as reduced to just meditation, which you'll find in many places, that unlike the immigrant Buddhists we have across North America now, the Western Zen Center, Meditation Center, will have some ritual, at least the one I go to very close to my house that I send students do. They do have rituals, but it's not the same as if they're in Asia either. But I want them to be alert to this reduction of Buddhism to simply therapy. In fact, that's what some of my students are going to get sent their take home exam in about three hours. They're going

to be asked to describe this very situation. So we'll see how well they do. Examinations are also an assessment of how well you taught them. So I'm about to see how well I succeeded in what I just outlined.

00:28:25:05 - 00:28:28:04

**Sarah:** Right, in the impossible COVID classroom of teaching them online.

00:28:29:23 - 00:28:30:12

**Todd:** Yes it is.

00:28:30:14 - 00:28:45:28

**Sarah:** Yeah. Well, since we went there, can I ask you a little bit about what changed, what adapted, what worked? Maybe what you would do differently as you go forward online because you're, I'm sure, doing remote online now like the rest of us?

00:28:46:13 - 00:30:04:23

**Todd:** Yeah, that's right. It's all online and in a way, the COVID situation for my big Buddhism class worked just fine. I have now recorded all the lectures for that class. I recorded the second half of the introductory class last term in the spring because we had to bug out and go remote right in the middle of March, and then I had to record to catch up to last semester this semester. So now the whole course is there and students can watch and rewatch and do it on their own time. So having these live discussion sections, I see some positivity in that, first of all, all the students' names are right there on the scoreboard across you. So when you have 50 students, it's nearly hopeless to remember names in that context. But I really find that I don't mind getting the quiet ones. I can call them out because they're all right in front of me. So I think it's made, in some ways, the classroom a little bit better that students don't hide, they can't hide as much.

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**Sarah:** A different kind of equalizing, maybe.

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**Todd:** Exactly. And especially the quiet women in class. You know, I'm sensitive about that problem anyway and how the boys want to jump up first always, almost. But I think it's been better for that. But I think in the long run being present with students and seeing in their eyes whether they're really getting it, it somehow it doesn't come through on Zoom in the same way anyway.

00:30:37:18 - 00:31:26:03

**Todd:** The one thing that I have gone into in the last two semesters circles to one of my other important takeaways about teaching introduction to Buddhism, and that is about what is the Dharma. Just hang with me for a second. So the Buddha reveals all kinds of teachings about analysis and defining reality, and that's the dharma. That's the basis of philosophy and doctrinal exegesis. But the Buddha also, and this is neglected by scholars, and I've been reading this encyclopedia of Buddhism that I contributed to, it's been out about 10-12 years now, and I've just decided to read it cover to cover, which is kind of a strange thing.

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**Sarah:** That's the Princeton Encyclopedia of Buddhism?

00:31:33:09 - 00:33:03:18

**Todd:** No, it's a two volume edited by by Buswell, and it has a yellow cover. Anyway, it was in a way the authoritative people writing about what they're experts in. Anyway, I see that it's not even in there. The



Dharma, the Buddha reveals, is also in important texts and some of the most used texts in the Buddhist world are about mantras and dharanis to protect people, to stave off illness, to keep your children alive, to help make your mind clear to do other spiritual work. That is the Dharma, too. I translated a text called the *Pancha Raksha*, it's Nepalese manifestation, and here the Buddha gives, as a compassionate action to his followers, specific mantras and dharanis to chant to help out in this life, to help in the pragmatic problems of life. So I searched through and had my Nepalese co-author Naresh Bajracarya, we've identified what his tradition is saying to chant if you want to be safe from epidemics. Epidemics were a part of the ancient world that we're not aware of any more, we don't think about it.

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**Todd:** Half of the children died before they got to be five years old in most of the ancient world. When you know that, now you can understand dukkha, whereas you don't get it before that. And if you've had little ones, I can't even imagine what that dukkha is to have half of your children die before they get to be 5. We fall in love with them, they are the most precious things to us. Yet in samsara that's what dukkha means. So of course people wanted protection from epidemics, of course they wanted these contributions to make their children pass through this dangerous early period in life. And if you look at what texts were actually used and copied, and Gene and I are hoping to do a project just to count the texts that were illustrated, I bet the *Pancha Raksha* will outnumber the *Prajnaparamita* by 5 or 10 to 1 in terms of their presence in the monasteries. So to me, that is another reason why that 5% is accurate. Working texts were like working art, what mattered to people.

00:34:22:29 - 00:34:44:23

**Sarah:** Yeah, right. And so and you're showing your students then that Buddhism is always wrapped up in also helping people with the very mundane and the very practical and the very immediate and specific worldly concerns, not just the philosophical highest achievement.

00:34:45:11 - 00:35:14:15

**Todd:** Yes. One of the great resources that I read as a grad student was it was an article by David Mandelbaum, who was an indologist and taught at Berkeley for many years, and he talked about how religion always has to take into account both the transcendental elements and the pragmatic elements. If you neglect that, you're really missing something.

00:35:16:29 - 00:35:49:28

**Sarah:** So I wanted to switch gears a little bit. We had just last week the American Academy of Religion annual meeting, virtually of course, and this year's program included the Buddhist Pedagogy Seminar, which was initiated in 2019. Actually, it was really reading about that conversation from the 2019 meeting that helped us clarify, along with Frances Garrett here who attended then, our kind of aims as a podcast to focus more on pedagogy. So thank you for that.

00:35:50:07 - 00:35:52:03

**Todd:** Oh, that's great to know!

00:35:52:05 - 00:36:14:15

**Sarah:** Yeah. So you were the presider at the Buddhism Pedagogy Seminar, and there were five presentations in the session that just happened recently. Could you reflect a little bit on that session and what you see changing or staying the same as we collectively try to change or improve our teaching?

00:36:15:21 - 00:38:07:09

**Todd:** Yeah. Well, it was an interesting group. I guess I'm one of the old guys in the room now most of the time and to hear these young scholars describe what they want to accomplish in their intro to

Buddhism class... I mean, I'm not sure I have anything very profound to say about this, except that it was clear to me that the context of our teaching is a huge part of how we should teach. We just had a follow up board meeting yesterday afternoon with the leaders of that group on what the call for papers will be for next year and thinking about this. But I like the idea of the Mahayana concept "upaya", skillful means, as Buddhism professor. I think you have to really meet your students where they are, and every institution has a slightly different culture, and it's very profound, as I said before, between liberal arts colleges with no grad students, no grad programs, and that kind of department and student body versus what you teach where I was trained as a buddhologist in a big research university. I studied at Columbia and I was completely unready to teach in schools or at research universities. It still shocks me that I ended up at Holy Cross and I had a very nice career here, don't get me wrong. But I never get to do advanced teaching, except for the occasional Harvard graduate student who wants me on the committee and all that kind of thing.

00:38:07:11 - 00:40:02:21

**Todd:** So it really does depend upon that, and that's a huge variable. If you don't get that right... I had a conversation with one of the people who presented, he wanted his students to come away with a sort of post-modern understanding of religion, and I kind of gently wanted him to hear that I don't think that is the main problem that we have in this world, we have religious illiteracy as a problem, and before they sort of get their perfect framed understanding of religion to me that's something way back. Upaya tells me to get people literate and clear about what Buddhism was and how to understand it. So, yeah, but we have a chance to air these assumptions, and I think since there very rarely are many people at our institution who also teach Buddhism, I think our group provides a forum so that people can sort of bring out what may may be subconscious to them. Because I know my worst mistakes when I started teaching was trying to provide insight that I wish I had myself when I was in their stage. Of course, 99.9% of my students are not like me. They weren't budding intellectuals, they didn't have a passion for the subject. They're not that, and so it took me a good few years to finally realize that this was not the most effective way to reach students. So that's what I think the meta purpose of our AAR group is.

00:40:03:07 - 00:40:39:06

**Sarah:** Interesting. Yeah, I can relate a lot to that. I had a delightful experience recently of rediscovering the course pack from the very first Buddhism course I took as a McGill undergrad years ago. So it's from 20 years ago and looking at it now, it's a much richer course than I think I knew at the time. But that doesn't mean I didn't like it. I loved that course, and I certainly was an attentive student. But yeah, I didn't get half of it, really. I mean, looking at it again, I was like, oh, that's what he was doing!

00:40:39:08 - 00:41:16:03

**Todd:** This is the thing, you know? That's the problem with mainly research scholars descending down into the undergraduate introductory course. I mean, I studied with one of the most peculiar people in Buddhist studies in the 20th century, a guy named Alex Wayman, and he was completely unable to connect with normal human beings and his teaching was very idiosyncratic. In a way, once you get to graduate school you teach yourself, with some guidance.

00:41:16:28 - 00:41:18:04

**Sarah:** You're supposed to.

00:41:19:10 - 00:41:35:27

**Todd:** Yeah, but there was also the guy who mainly taught the undergraduates whom I TA'd for and learned a great deal about teaching from him, even though I still made the mistake of being a little too fancy in my early classes.

00:41:37:15 - 00:41:54:21

**Sarah:** Well, since we're there I want to ask you how did you become who you are in the field? When did the interest in Buddhism start or how? Was it a study abroad program or some other venue? How did this human from the southern United States end up studying this?

00:41:59:05 - 00:42:37:14

**Todd:** I wanted to get out of the South, so I went to Rutgers as an undergraduate and I was a psych major and I was working in a lab for my sophomore year onward. I was all ready to go on, and my mentor there who was a famous psychologist was expecting me to. I was already taking grad students as a senior undergraduate, but this one day I had this experience that I realized as the graduate student deadlines were upon me that I was going to be working in a rat lab for the rest of my life. It was the rats and the monkeys...

00:42:38:09 - 00:42:38:24

**Sarah:** You didn't want that.

00:42:39:26 - 00:43:18:29

I just decided I got to have an option here, I need an alternative. I'd taken enough courses, I could have been a double major and if we had minors, I would have been a religion minor, but I had some wonderful teachers at Rutgers in religion and they encouraged me, and I got funded to go to Wisconsin-Madison and to Columbia and for family reasons I went to Columbia. Today I'd never get in any of these programs because I had no Asian languages. I had to start Sanskrit and Pali and sort of catch up.

00:43:19:06 - 00:43:22:17

**Sarah:** Did you start the languages at Columbia?

00:43:22:19 - 00:44:08:03

**Todd:** Yeah, I did, and because Wayman taught Tibetan in an almost incomprehensible way, I didn't do the philological, you know, the full house of preparation. So I didn't do Tibetan and I didn't do Chinese, and I didn't do Japanese. Like some of my friends did all of the above from scratch and it was a really tough climb. But I did Nepalese languages because I found a mentor there who was a sane and very wonderful human being. He actually just died this fall, but I had a life-long friendship with my mentor.

00:44:08:05 - 00:44:08:27

**Sarah:** What was his name?

00:44:10:04 - 00:45:16:01

**Todd:** Theodore Riccardi Jr., he is an indologist at Columbia. He spoke like 10 Asian languages and was a concert pianist. Magnificent human being who also helped me get through. I always tell my students, you need to find a mentor because there will be times when you need him or her to get through. I think we all know that's true. Anyway, Riccardi was very open to my other great interest which was anthropology and so I took courses with some of the greats who were at Columbia in those days, there was a guy named Marvin Harris who is a chief thinker in cultural ecology, and I studied with a guy named Robert Murphy. There are other people but I won't go any further. But I took the very last field methods course with Margaret Mead, who was an amazing influence and a scary, scary person.

00:45:16:03 - 00:45:16:18

**Sarah:** Wow. What was she like to study with as a student?

00:45:20:17 - 00:46:41:03

**Todd:** You had to talk your way into her course because she was famous at that point, very famous. She carried a walking stick that she would bang on the floor for emphasis, and so I had to go one-on-one in her office, with Dr. Mead as she was called, and I told her I already had a Fulbright and I was going to study Buddhism in the Himalayas and she stopped me right there, and she banged her stick on the floor and she said, "young man, what is your hypothesis? What is your main hypothesis?" so I made up something on the spot and she let me in. We had to go out into New York City and do little ethnographic projects and it was tremendous preparation for the practicalities of fieldwork, as well as the reason I think like a social historian or cultural historian is because of the anthropology. So that's why when I confront the philological biases in Buddhist studies and the really poor progress we've made in getting past the first draft of the history of Buddhism, I think I'm really glad that I went through this long... I mean, it took me 10 years to finish my PhD.

00:46:41:14 - 00:46:43:05

**Sarah:** Hey, no shame in that. That's normal.

00:46:43:09 - 00:48:06:26

**Todd:** Yeah, but if I wanted to go another year I could have gotten the second PhD In anthropology. But at the time I just wanted to get the hell out of graduate school. Your whole life is on hold and that was hard enough, but I had to mainly look in departments of religion or area studies to get employment and none of these were good places to be in the middle of the Reagan administration in the mid-80s. But those two backgrounds of anthropology pushed me to be interested in social history and cultural history, to be interested in texts, but to be interested in the context of texts. That's why at Buddhism meetings I always want to ask the textual people, can you show me how often this text that you've told us and interpreted and translated so magnificently, how much it ever got out of the stacks to the community and to influencing real people. That's not part of the working definition of a philologically-inclined scholar.

00:48:07:21 - 00:49:00:03

**Todd:** I have no problem with them, I don't challenge their legitimacy, but I think just living in that 5% bubble is not good for having our students, to get back to the teaching side of this, understand the typical Buddhist, whether it's an immigrant down the street at the storefront, temple or if you travel the world. When I ask people in Kathmandu who I studied intensively, merchants in Kathmandu, "have you ever heard of Madhyamika philosophy?", "is that like Mahayana?" These philosophies have a very limited social context and I think a very limited historical causal effect.

00:49:02:09 - 00:49:08:15

**Sarah:** I love how you articulated that we've done a poor job getting past the first draft of our history of Buddhism.

00:49:09:14 - 00:49:12:21

**Todd:** I've stolen that from Greg Schopen by the way, whose an old friend of mine.

00:49:13:26 - 00:49:46:04

**Sarah:** Right, ok. But so what do you think is the path forward then to get past or out of the poor job we're doing? One of the goals of this podcast is to also expose that Buddhism is being taught in all these really different venues, right, and really different kinds of contexts and departments now. But there's still some scholars among us who would believe that, like the philological approach to Buddhist studies, is the one. Period.

00:49:47:20 - 00:50:46:27

**Todd:** Well, you need that, and text and historical records are what we do the history of religions with. What I'd like to see more of is including anthropological texts as well, not to turn every Buddhism course into the anthropology of Buddhism, but to provide some kind of social, historical imagination to what we see now. Admittedly, what I said a little while ago that the modern period Buddhisms had to be rebuilt almost everywhere. There's no "nothing's ever changed and this is ageless" Buddhism anywhere. That's nonsense from the Buddhist doctrinal point of view, as well as from the modern history of the world. But I would like to have some kind of students to get an awareness in their first taste of what Buddhism and practice looks like.

00:50:48:24 - 00:51:22:12

**Todd:** I like to have a reader that would do this adequately. I'm about to go on sabbatical, and it may be my last paid sabbatical, so I'm trying to figure out how to spend this precious lifespan that's not unlimited on, what to do. I did have a proposal to do a series at Oxford on Buddhism in practice. But I got a new editor and I took too long to get it under way and so now it's been tabled. No one wants to make big decisions at the moment.

00:51:22:22 - 00:51:25:25

**Sarah:** It's a bad time for big moves. We all feel that.

00:51:26:02 - 00:51:41:27

**Todd:** I would like to see that possibility to have these short books about Buddhism in a particular place. Looking at a particular sector. Like what's it like to be in a Buddhist monastery? What's it really like? There are some interesting stories

00:51:41:29 - 00:51:46:28

**Sarah:** And for who? For different people, right? There's also different people who come to a monastery for different reasons.

00:51:47:29 - 00:52:21:18

**Todd:** Absolutely, so I think what Schopen has done with opening up with this *Mulasarvastivada Vinaya*, to see how diverse that mature monastic tradition was. I think that's the way it developed everywhere. I mean, different flavors and different manifestations, different national contexts where governments wanted more or less control over the sangha. But that kind of imagination is not just going to come out of doing critical editions of texts, right. It's just not going to.

00:52:21:25 - 00:52:23:28

**Sarah:** Right. But we need both somehow.

00:52:25:22 - 00:53:01:00

**Todd:** We do, yeah. So I don't know... Schopen has had some health problems himself, and I got away from doing this project, but I wanted a reader that would include a reader on inscriptions. If you can start Buddhism from inscriptions only and forget the texts, which as I say could have just meant that they were in the stacks and didn't get any sunlight or use, but inscriptions have a different level of reliability and practicality, although not without their own problems.

00:53:02:09 - 00:53:07:27

**Sarah:** I'm obsessed with inscriptions, thank you. Inscriptions are one of my passions, working on Inscription.

00:53:08:09 - 00:53:48:11

**Todd:** You would say completely different things about Buddhism from that, and some of the things in the texts are not borne out in the inscriptions, you know, like monks and nuns not being wealthy. Well, some of them were building huge monuments, give me a break. So I don't know, there are lots of other serious things going on in the world besides doing chiropractic on Buddhist studies, right? I don't see why we have to keep reproducing the first draft of history. That is regretted. In my opinion, I think we should be doing better by now.

00:53:48:13 - 00:53:57:16

**Sarah:** I know, or it feels a little like navel gazing, right? Like if we just keep spinning the same yarns, even when we actually know that there's a lot of contravening facts.

00:53:58:17 - 00:55:24:28

**Todd:** Yeah. Well, there are interesting points on what's in and what's out of the introductory course. I have mixed feelings about sharing tantra with undergraduates in their first course. For example, when I asked the fine young scholar David Gray at Santa Clara to talk about how he teaches what his specialty is, he's the expert on the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* and many other things having to do with tantric tradition, and how do you teach it? I still teach tantra, but I don't get into sexual yoga or any of that stuff, except mentioning that it is one practice. But it looks to me like in scale and in practical terms over the many centuries that this was mostly about visualization. But I don't feel like I should tell privileged undergraduate students what the typical householder in Nepal would not be given without an initiation, you know? So that's a bit coming from my own time working in a Mahayana/Vajrayana community in which these boundaries to practice were taken very seriously, and I respected them myself. I did not try to break the code or to do that thing when I was a researcher.

00:55:25:15 - 00:55:43:00

**Todd:** So there are issues like that, but I think you need to establish a first foundation and then later studies or classes can complexify that as needed. But I think religious literacy has to be at the forefront of what we're writing about.

00:55:43:02 - 00:55:59:27

**Sarah:** So what do you want your students to get out of these Buddhism classes? If we're not needing to really rework too much, at least for our students sake, this first draft of the history of Buddhism, what are the learning outcomes that you want your students to walk away with?

00:56:00:03 - 00:56:02:00

**Todd:** Oh, the learning outcomes...

00:56:03:07 - 00:56:04:26

**Sarah:** Or the big pictures.

00:56:04:28 - 00:56:37:11

**Todd:** No, I know that's the jargon of the day and I'm fine with that. I want them to be basically literate about the history of Buddhism in a critical way. I will often encourage them to think critically about Buddhism itself. I'm not trying to give them a rosy view or a negative view, like, this is the heresy of Buddhism, the way it was probably taught at Holy Cross a century ago.

00:56:38:25 - 00:56:40:06

**Sarah:** Some places five years ago!

00:56:42:10 - 00:57:54:19

**Todd:** That may be true also. What I tell them at the start of the course is that their job is to think through Buddhist doctrine, to think like a Buddhist as much as you can. I try to subtly undermine their assumptions at the start. For example, some of them may believe that all religions are saying the same thing, and I just don't want to stick a pin in that balloon. But I don't anymore. I just decide I'm just going to blow this thing up. It's got to go right now. Are they saying the same thing when we talk about "one time around", a world view of the Abrahamic traditions, versus samsara with many lifetimes? Is the logic of living a religious life the same when you have to get it all right in this life? and this gets to the successive approximation of nirvana that scholars have talked about. Buddhists don't think it's all or nothing right now, here, do it. Some do, and the tradition encourages people to get busy and don't be complacent.

00:57:55:02 - 00:59:07:23

**Todd:** But some people know if you've got to farm a field and murder all those ants and worms every year, you know you're making lots of bad karma and you've got to compensate it if you're a farmer, right? So you know it's not realistic that you're going to reach nirvana in this lifetime, it's just laughably impossible. So I guess I want them to see, first of all, that there are other ways of defining reality that are legitimate and have a logic of their own. I'd say it usually takes about a month because some of the terminology is new. But we live in a karma bhoomi. We live in a world that's dictated in part by karma, and people manage their karma, and that's a good Buddhist. The question also comes up, what's a good Buddhist? And this is where sometimes they get the misimpression that only the monk in the cave doing the three year or three month retreat is a great Buddhist. I say no. If you take refuge in practice as best you can, that's a good Buddhist.

00:59:08:15 - 00:59:55:13

**Todd:** It's just like saying only the Jesuits are good Christians or something like that, which hits home with them because, you know, we've had some very bad behavior from catholic priests over recent years. So I want them to be able to think through the Buddhist worldview, and I want them to also start, indirectly, to think about how their own view, the way they are, what they inherited from their parents from when they were kids and had no defense or couldn't defend themselves, to see how the world is put together in different, legitimate ways. To me, that contribution to humanistic learning is really at the center, even more important than getting the details of the Eightfold Path in the Four Noble Truths.

00:59:57:24 - 01:01:16:21

**Todd:** This flexibility of mind, this ability to imagine other worlds that people can inhabit authentically, and spirituality, that is very powerful. My students, I always tell them, I always have a meditation teacher come in, I never crossed the line on being a guru. That's been a loss this semester. That's a loss right there because I haven't had anyone do a Zoom meditation session. I take them and I sit with them, but I don't teach the meditation. But what they'll always remember after they forget the details of the date of the Mahayana, the rise of the Mahayana tradition, is that meditation experience. I get postcards from students who now have their own kids, who some of them maybe even going to Holy Cross, who say "you know, that meditation... I've had a practice the rest of my life". Up until now I've done something like that. So that kind of taste of spirituality that they're free to ignore or to follow themselves is very much a part of what, at least the Jesuits that I know... There aren't many Jesuits left, by the way, but the Jesuit culture of Holy Cross, they are very much in favor of.

01:01:16:23 - 01:01:54:04

**Todd:** The Jesuits at Holy Cross are the Jesuits who say it's our duty to find God in all things, including other religions. So I've been supported and we have mindfulness and Zen people come to Holy Cross all the time. In fact, we gave an honorary degree to the Zen Roshi Jesuit Robert Kennedy about four years

ago, which was one of my crowning moments in the College of the Holy Cross. So anyway, I want students to have an open mind and to experience a taste of the thinking and of the spirituality of Buddhism.

01:01:55:11 - 01:02:18:12

**Sarah:** I appreciate also hearing you talk about the meditation experience in class because I'm going to teach a course about meditation next term, about Buddhist meditation, and yeah I'm really vastly unqualified to do so in terms of practice. I'm no great meditator nor a meditation teacher, but I do think there's value to exposing them to the experience of it.

01:02:18:27 - 01:02:41:00

**Todd:** There is, and I hear good things about how some professors start their classes with five minutes of silent mindfulness. That challenges my stand about not being the person because you can't bring someone in every class. So if the benefit is really there maybe I should do an experiment and not be so rigid with that.

01:02:41:15 - 01:02:48:26

**Sarah:** The apps now too, there's all these apps, right? You can also just incentivize, like, download the app and make sure you do 10 minutes.

01:02:49:15 - 01:03:47:14

**Todd:** That's what I did this semester. I said find something and do it at the time my intro class usually does it. The other concern I have, by the way, I think it's important to get beyond the just the vipassana thing. I have people come and do the four immeasurables and do metta, loving kindness, and so the person does vipassana for an hour and metta contemplation, and I said, you know, well, Jesus said "love your enemy", the Buddhists actually defined a practice on how to do that, and that intrigues especially my Catholic students. I don't know if you've ever done that, but it's really worth looking into where you visualize people and extend loving kindness from your heart, from yourself outward. That's really a great thing.

01:03:47:25 - 01:04:25:17

**Todd:** And the other thing that I actually I just have to confess, I guess I break my own rule, I was given an initiation by a Tibetan lama that is designed to be shared without restriction on visualization of Avalokiteshvara. The is Lama Yeshe by the way, the great lama who had practiced in the Kathmandu Valley, and I can send you what I send to them, but they have to memorize a visual form and then relate to it in a very simple meditation that turns out not to be so simple.

01:04:26:12 - 01:04:28:06

**Sarah:** Oh, cool. That's so fascinating

01:04:28:17 - 01:04:29:12

**Todd:** I'll send that to you.

01:04:29:14 - 01:05:06:18

**Sarah:** Yeah I'd love to know. Metta, loving kindness meditation, that's one of the first things that I was asked to do as an undergrad in a Buddhism course, and I feel like also now it resonates so much with students because of this idea of like interdependence and circles of concern and circles of like where your responsibility lies. I think especially in this COVID reality where people are rapidly, at least hopefully, recognizing how responsible they are, even to unseen actors in the world, it could be really beautiful.



01:05:06:20 - 01:05:31:03

**Todd:** Yes, I think in these times these practices are really a real bulwark of sanity to have this kind of practice. I mean, the insanity around us is ongoing. It's not going to go away, and I think it's a life tool for many students.

01:05:34:11 - 01:06:00:02

**Sarah:** So I have a final question for you which may be a bit of an imaginative exercise. But how do you think Buddhism is going to be taught post-COVID, post-Trump, post whatever all the other messes we're in? Where do you think the future lies for how we can or should be growing in our teaching of Buddhism?

01:06:00:10 - 01:07:23:21

**Todd:** Hmm. I didn't see that coming. Maybe you told me, but I forgot. I'm not sure that I'm going to see Buddhism taught differently, I wish it were. I wish some of the things that I have shared with you today would be so. What I am concerned with, and one of my friends and students at University of Vermont, Kevin Traynor, the provost of that university, just deleted the religion department. So I'm starting to wonder about, as other people are in these apocalyptic times, about the economic impact on higher education and how some administrators are going to contract to be occupational-minded courses with few majors and neglect the core of the liberal arts. So that's been on my mind because that's been all over the Buddhist listservs, and trying to resist these bureaucrats making these kinds of decisions. So that's not exactly an uplifting last thought.

01:07:23:23 - 01:07:39:26

**Sarah:** I know. It's alright. Well, it's interesting. What would you hope for like after your retirement? When you retire you don't have to worry about the teaching so much anymore and you get to publish the stuff you want. What would you hope for the young ones coming up, getting to teach intro to Buddhism?

01:07:39:28 - 01:09:15:05

**Todd:** I would like to see, and these are the most transformative things that happen in college, I would like to see connections with Asia, with students going to study abroad more. I'd like to see the connections with Asians now present in the United States or in North America, who will connect with college students as well. There's nothing like meeting people and to see the humanity in being a Buddhist, then getting to know Buddhists. It's all in our heads, even on the screen when we show movies, it's still a little bit distancing. But to go to a temple and to meet people and to go to Asia and see how the logic of local life is sort of entwined with the practice of Buddhism is a very powerful, transformative educational experience. So to me, that reality of human contact is something that we should anticipate increasing. Buddhists are now everywhere in urban centers across the globe. Tibetan Buddhist centers have multiplied incredibly, but other groups as well, from Vietnam to Laotians to Cambodians, Thais, there are temples all over and there are people all over who are still practicing Buddhism. I wish our students could bridge the gap to connect them to America through their interest and respect for them.

01:09:15:23 - 01:09:21:19

**Sarah:** Yeah. Thank you, that's lovely. Well, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us today.

01:09:22:10 - 01:09:25:18

**Todd:** It was my pleasure, and your questions made it a true delight

01:09:26:07 - 01:09:32:15

**Sarah:** Thank you. It was a real honor to speak with you, and I hope that we get to continue the conversation in the future.

01:09:32:23 - 01:09:36:01

**Todd:** I would very much look forward to that. Thank you.

01:09:38:23 - 01:10:22:11

**Sarah:** Thank you for listening to the conversation with Todd. You can find more information about Todd's research and publications on his profile page. We'll post a link in the show notes. Remember, show notes and transcripts are available on our website at [TeachingBuddhism.net](http://TeachingBuddhism.net), and if you have enjoyed this, we would really love to hear from you. Please let us know over social media or email. And remember, you can subscribe to this podcast through Apple or Stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts. A very special thanks to Dr. Betsy Moss, my partner in crime, for recording, editing and producing this podcast. This podcast was produced by the Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation Center for Buddhist Studies at the University of Toronto. Thanks for listening and be well.