

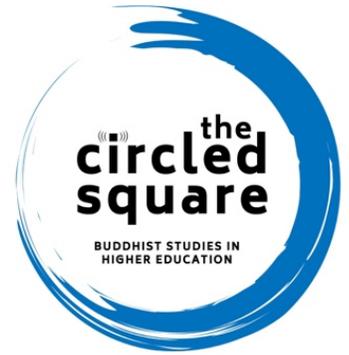
Episode 09: Rongdao Lai, Living Religions in the Classroom

File Length: 00:47:28

Speakers

Sarah Richardson

Rongdao Lai



00:00:01:09 - 00:00:28:14

Rongdao: It is absolutely necessary that students know about how we came to be who we are as a discipline, why certain languages are taught, why certain texts receive more attention than others, whose Buddhist canon are we talking about here.

00:00:33:17 - 00:01:14:29

Sarah: Hello and welcome to this episode of The Circled Square, the podcast where we talk about teaching Buddhist Studies in higher education. My name is Dr. Sarah Richardson and I teach at the University of Toronto. In this episode I sat down with Dr. Rongdao Lai, assistant professor of Chinese religions in the School of Religious Studies at McGill University, who also has a joint appointment with the Department of East Asian Studies. This episode is called Living Religion in the Classroom: Teaching Chinese Buddhism. This interview was recorded in February 2020, just before we went into lockdown and before this whole COVID-19 pandemic changed all our lives. So Rongdao and I were pretty focused on talking about in-person teaching. She was in town for a new model lecture on her research.

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Sarah: When I sat down with Rongdao, I was really interested in asking about her complicated relationship as a professor and a nun in Quebec, a province where tacitly new, and what some of us would call racist laws have emerged in recent years. For those of you unfamiliar with Quebecois politics, this was us referring to a recently, at that time passed, bill 21 in Quebec. This is a bill aimed at ensuring secularism. The separation of church and state, and a component of which was banning visible conspicuous displays of religious symbols worn by public workers. It elicited some justified public outcry, but stands nonetheless. We moved from there to the topic of what was important for Rongdao to teach her students, in her sometimes very large classes, and we got into the complicated but commonly held problem that many of our students often have this kind of culturally formed preconception that Buddhism is a philosophy and not a religion, and we heard from Rongdao about what she sees as the importance of really showing and teaching Buddhism as a still-living religion. Some strategies she used to do this: visiting temples, watching videos, and really centering still-unfolding and changing Buddhist groups today, taking them seriously, and working with graduate students as well, to make sure they understand and problematize the canon of what has counted, what has been the focus and the academic study of Buddhism so far, which is ultimately a fairly young academic discipline and really centering new things.

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Sarah: Now if you're just joining us on this podcast, maybe this is the first episode you've heard... Welcome, and please listen, follow, and subscribe. We have quite a few wonderful episodes already out so please share and tell people about this project, and enjoy my conversation with Rongdao

00:03:07:28 - 00:03:19:14

Rongdao: My name is Rongdao Lai, I teach in the School of Religious Studies and also the Department of East Asian studies at McGill University in Montreal.

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Sarah: Can you tell us just a little bit about the landscape? Who are your students at McGill? What are their interests when they come to your classes?

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Rongdao: So basically I teach courses on Buddhism, Chinese religions, and Asian Studies, broadly defined. So this has only been my second semester back at McGill, because I actually also did my PhD at McGill. I'm still learning about the program and also the School of Religious Studies itself, the school has gone through a major transition that I'm not going to spend time talking about in recent years. It opens up all sorts of possibilities and interesting opportunities, but at the same time I think this is also a period of change and re-imagination for both the institution that I'm currently at, and also myself as a teacher.

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Sarah: So take us back a little bit to your own biography. Where did you begin your study of Buddhism? How did you get drawn out of that engineering building and into classes about about Buddhism?

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Rongdao: I have a background in science and for the first 19 years of my life I really wasn't that interested in religion or Buddhism per se, and I'm only going to keep the long story very short and tell you that that changed one day, and I decided that I was going to practice.

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Sarah: This is at the tender age of 20 or something?

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Rongdao: Nineteen, twenty... Yeah yeah. Rebellious tender age of just wanting to do something different.

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Rongdao: So instead of going all the way through it and getting a bachelor's degree then master's then a PhD, I actually went on a little bit of a detour and I was ordained, and spent quite a number of years practicing or getting trained at a temple, before I reemerged and

thought that I would go back to university but this time around finish my university degree in religious studies. And of course you know that in and by itself was a huge change

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Sarah: I'm sure. But what an interesting lens you must have brought to it too. So you're an ordained nun in a Chinese Buddhist Order?

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Rongdao: Yes. In the Chinese tradition.

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Sarah: What has that been like, teaching in an academic setting while also being an ordained monastic? What does that mean? Is it difficult to reconcile those two things? Have there been moments of, in your self, confusion or discomfort around those things? Or has it been straightforward and easy?

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Rongdao: I often jokingly... Well you can imagine how often I get asked this question, and my favorite way to answer that is that it's actually much easier to do it, than to convince people that it is doable... Anyway, there's several things happening at the same time here. Looking the way I do, walking into a classroom it definitely gives you, in most cases, almost automatically a very friendly audience. You walk into a classroom, your students see you and they go, "oh here's a Buddhist", and often "here's a real Buddhist who is practicing". So that can be thought of as a blessing I would say.

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Rongdao: But at the same time, you also get all sorts of assumptions and ideals and ideas about Buddhism or expectations projected onto you, which is not always conducive to what you would like to happen in a university classroom.

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Sarah: Since we're in a podcast, and our listeners probably can't see us right now, unless they have magical powers or they're looking at our website, how do you look? Can you describe yourself.? What do you think your students see when you walk into a classroom?

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Rongdao: Well okay, so I teach in Quebec, which has recently passed a law banning conspicuous religious symbols. Bill 21. It doesn't apply to university professors, but I often do think about these things and wonder if my bald head for example is a conspicuous religious symbol. Other than that I look like others walking down the street. But again, I mean especially when you're teaching a course on Buddhism, and when students don't just come in to learn about Buddhism but come in already with whatever ideas about Buddhism that they already have, either from maybe a cultural heritage background, you know, "my parents, my grandparents practice Buddhism, there's a shrine at home and I just want to learn more about

it" or, "I do mindfulness". And they see that you have this course on modern Buddhism, and modern Buddhism is all about the scientific, rational, non-superstitious... Buddhism isn't it. So you have all these assumptions that students come to class with.

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Rongdao: Which, again, I mean I don't see it so much as a problem or even a challenge to how I would teach about Buddhism, but opportunities for conversations. So however these ideas were constructed in the process of Buddhism being constructed as a world religion itself or how the field of Buddhist studies went through all these changes, and what kind of decisions were made in deciding what we do and don't study and so on and so forth. They all have part to do with how these ideas came to be. But nonetheless you have students walking into your class already in most cases very interested in Buddhism and wanting to learn more.

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Sarah: Yeah. So let's roleplay for a second. I'm an undergraduate student in your class and we're in week... three. We're comfortable enough to know each other now a bit, and I say to you, "no, but I've heard that Buddhism isn't really a religion at all, Buddhism is just rational and scientific and Buddhism is actually a philosophy, it's a philosophy of mind, it's not even really a religion"... How would you want to respond to that student?

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Rongdao: I think that is in fact very real. Those of us who have been teaching Buddhism long enough know that you get these questions or comments almost all the time, probably every time you teach a course on Buddhism. In my own teaching, I really do think a lot about voice and inclusion also in relation to this larger discipline that we call Buddhist Studies. Think of the decisions that we have to make in teaching either an intro section or an entire intro course on Buddhism. What are the decisions that go into informing quote unquote, what is "core Buddhism", that we would like students to walk away with?

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Rongdao: Why do we always start with the Four Noble Truths and why does it always have to be followed by the Eightfold Path, and followed by interdependence?

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Sarah: Because that's how our textbooks are written...

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Rongdao: That's how textbooks are written, right. And so when I think about voice and inclusion, on the one hand, students are curious and those questions, for example "Buddhism is a philosophy, it's a way of life, is not real religion" so and so forth, really opens up a door to talk about...

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Sarah: So what would you actually say to a student? Let's open that door. So, "it's not a religion! It shouldn't even be taught in religious studies! It's not a religion at all, it's just a philosophy. It's different than all the other religions. It's not actually one of them at all."

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Rongdao: So instead of taking on the students, often I would deflect, believe it or not, because if you look around the room long enough you'll see that someone would start shaking their head, and you know these students either have already taken a course on like the theory and method of religious studies and so on and so forth, who would disagree with such claim, right. Or you have someone who grew up in a cultural environment in which of course Buddhism is very much a religion, and they would come up with you know their own argument as to why this is a religion. So to me, I think inclusion or voice includes like really kind of creating this classroom environment where students can talk about these critical ideas instead of saying definitively whether it is or it is not a religion.

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Rongdao: Again, as much as I would... In a way we all have this privilege, at least a lot of us enjoy having... To be in to be in this position of authority and say, "I do have the final say in class" right, but then very very often I find that the students can actually learn from one another a lot more than we are acknowledging, that when when you empower your students to speak their mind, when you give them the tools, and the language, and the confidence to really make an argument and be able to present and deliver that argument and engage in a very reasonable informed discussion. I think that kind of a learning process is not just important to students, but is it refreshing and amazing for me as the teacher as well every time going into the classroom.

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Sarah: And how do you do that? So let's talk about how do you build a classroom environment that brings people out who maybe are nervous and don't want to talk in groups or aren't sure and confident in their ideas? What are some things that you feel you can do to build a kind of classroom culture where that kind of conversation is going to be possible?

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Rongdao: I'm into educational psychology. You know probably have theories about how long does it actually take for students to be willing to kind of let their guards down and come up with that. But to me it actually takes much shorter. You walk into class, you look around the room, you give your first 15, 20 minutes of lecture, and students, actually, I find to make up their mind much faster than we are admitting. I think a lot of it has to do with gesture. Do you really send signals to your students that you're here not just to teach to them, but also to listen to them?

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Rongdao: A lot of it has to do with the tone of your voice. Do you look around, make eye contact and do you pause? I pause probably way too much. At least every time I finish

explaining a important term or an important concept, very often I would look around the room and ask if students have a question.

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Rongdao: Of course you've got to allow that 3, 5 seconds when no one had questions because everyone is just too shy and too nervous, or feels too intimidated to say something, you know. And if you let that kind of tension build up a little bit as well, eventually someone will open up. If you do that exercise enough I find... Which is really beneficial to you having real conversation... And of course class size matters. Granted that it's much easier to have a conversation with 15, 20, even 35, 40 students. How do you do that in a classroom with 150 students? So I find that something at the institutional level is actually not conducive to creating an inclusive and encouraging environment for students to chip in.

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Sarah: Have you ever had to do those big classes?

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Rongdao: I've always had to do big classes. I think the largest that I've ever taught is like 200 or 250.

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Sarah: Wow. Okay. And those are what? Intro to Asian religions?

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Rongdao: intro to Buddhism, I also teach a lot of courses on Chinese religions, not just Chinese Buddhism per se.

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Sarah: So Daoism, Confucianism, what's in a Chinese religion course?

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Rongdao: Well how about Christianity and Islam? So again, the first thing to define myself, or as I usually like to do, get students to define is that what makes something Chinese? I mean if Christianity has been in China for over a thousand years, does that make Christianity a Chinese religion? And also, we talk a bit about the creation or the invention of this category "religion", how Buddhism became thought of in the 19th century, constructed as as a religious tradition.

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Rongdao: Well the same thing can be said about Daoism and Confucianism, and so then of course in a very conventional, for lack of a better word, setting you walk into a class when you sign up for a Chinese religions class, you expect to see Confucianism Daoism and Buddhism, right?

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Sarah: And you blow them away by saying that's not what we're gonna do?

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Rongdao: Well the majority of Chinese do not exclusively identify with one tradition or another. And so what do you do? So it's just like the question that you asked earlier about Buddhism being a religion, and being a philosophy and a way of life, but not a religion, and how hard it is to overcome such assumption. All it takes is a field trip, or a documentary. It goes, how about that now?

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Rongdao: Of course you always find that there will always be this kind of like resistance, I mean centuries of colonialism has really sort of baked this into our very idea of how should a religion look like as well. Students would then naturally say, "oh no, that's just culture". And then I think within the field of Buddhist studies, even in terms of deciding what we research, and how we publish, and how we identify ourselves as scholars of Buddhist studies, you have all this baggage of the history of the field written into who we are as well.

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Sarah: No question, and into the questions we ask, right?

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Rongdao: Mhmm. Of course then you know this assumption that you have "the greater" or the "great" Buddhist tradition, which is doctrine and text based, and then everything else that people do on the ground. And how do you help your students to appreciate and to be very sensitive of this fact that Buddhism is a living religion? We're not just teaching something which is an artifact from the past.

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Rongdao: You walk around Bloor streets and you encounter people who live their Buddhism on a daily basis. So to me how to teach responsibly, as a scholar, as a professor about a religion that is a living tradition that millions and millions of people in the world still draw meaning for their lives from, I think it's important to, speaking of inclusion and voice, it's also important to show this is how people live their Buddhism, and in our study of Buddhism... I'm not saying that we should privilege one kind one approach over others, but I think this aspect of Buddhism being a lived and a living religion, I still find that we're not doing enough in that sense, in showing students that look, you don't even have to go to Asia to find Buddhists.

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Sarah: Yeah. So what do you do? Do you take them on field trips? Do you make sure you take your students on field trips?

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Rongdao: I do make sure that I take students on field trips.

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Sarah: Where? Give me an example of something you've done.

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Rongdao: Let's say, for you guys in Toronto for example, Toronto is an incredibly diverse and multicultural city that I think when it comes time to take your students on a field trip, you probably would have a hard time deciding which temple, and you probably have like a good rotation of a set of temples that you can probably go to. Well similar things can be said about Montreal but at the same time we have far fewer compared to Toronto. So we do have this big Taiwanese Buddhist temple called a Fo Guang Shan temple in Montreal.

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Rongdao: In the Vietnamese community there is quite a few very very interesting and active temples. I think we don't always have to send our students to Asia to see that Buddhism is part of Canadian life.

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Sarah: So walk me through... How do you use the field trip as part of your course content? Do you have an assignment built around it, or what do you ask them to do when they go to the temple? Are you going in a group, or do they go on their own?

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Rongdao: We often go in a group. For those who are interested in further exploring maybe other religious sites, they can always take up this, say, research project. They can visit a temple and then maybe write a report or a paper, but the kind of field trip that I often organize are group visits. Of course sometimes the monks and nuns at the temple would be kind enough to offer like a guided tour with explained iconography, and they would explain the ritual and so on and so forth. I actually ask my students to just go in there and do as everyone does. So if this service is going to last two hours, please, you expect that, you go in there and participate.

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Rongdao: When you have to chant, for instance the Diamond Sutra...

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Sarah: Yeah but Fo Guang Shan at least has those ones written out in phonetics for you at the backs...

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Rongdao: You know, when you have to chant like the Heart Sutra like five different times during the service, then students will come back and tell me that, "you are right... It's a religion". Whatever your category, whatever your definition for a religion is.

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Rongdao: So yes, the philosophy and the doctrinal aspect of it is equally fascinating, but then, I mean it is very important for us to acknowledge that, to show that side of it to students that, hey, people do things, people treat texts as an object for devotion and ritual....

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Sarah: Not just a repository of content.

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Rongdao: People copy the Heart Sutra and wear it on themselves. How about understanding that aspect of it? Then maybe trying to analyze and explain away emptiness in the Heart Sutra.

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Sarah: And then how do you use videos or documentaries in class? You mentioned that as an example. Is that something you do? You also show lived Religion in other contexts through documentaries or video?

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Rongdao: Yes. In terms of multimedia though, I have to perhaps make this confession that I am a minimalist when it comes to teaching technology.

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Sarah: Do you use PowerPoint?

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Rongdao: I use PowerPoint minimally, because I actually find that... I mean what does it take for a good teacher to deliver a good lecture?

00:25:33:19 - 00:26:05:07

Rongdao: Maybe a white or a black board, a bunch of very attentive students, and a teacher who's there wanting to engage in a good conversation. So there are times when you really want to show a passage that you want students to be able to really focus on and maybe think about. So there are times when I would put text in my PowerPoint slides, but other than that, every time I use my PowerPoint is perhaps just to show a picture.

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Rongdao: It may not necessarily always be a video or documentary, but here's a picture of a shrine, here's a picture of people going on pilgrimage, here is a picture of women attending to their family shrine and making offerings to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. But other than that, I am pretty minimal when it comes to technology. Maybe in the future students appreciate hearing your podcast as a part of class.

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Sarah: Yeah this is another media. Exactly yes. I agree. Are there any documentaries or videos though that you've really liked? That you've used in class? I've used, I mean it's super dated

now, but I've used *The Marathon monks of Mount Hiei*, have you heard of that one? It's set in Japan. It's monks running around that incredible marathon circuit that ends with the big fast and students find it... It really kind of confounds them because it's such a different version of Buddhism than what they were expecting, its so corporal and physical. Yeah. So I use that one.

00:27:19:20 - 00:27:57:08

Rongdao: I have a favorite that every time when I have to give a lecture about text as a devotional object I like to show this segment, it's part of a larger movie, a Japanese one. The story is called *Kaidan*, In which the Heart Sutra is more or less just like written all over the body of a person to protect that person from being haunted, it's a horror movie. So I could send a link...

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Rongdao: These are interesting instances when you can show your students that this is how people do Buddhism. I really like the idea of talking about religion as something that people do, and this is how people engage with a text which is philosophically, supposed to be so central to the Mahayana tradition. But yet at the same time, you chant the Heart Sutra for protection, you copy it over your body so that the ghosts can't see you, you wear talismans so that it will protect you from harm and to me, teaching these aspects of buddhist practice, it's very important in my teaching about Buddhism.

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Sarah: Yeah. Wonderful. So you're showing them that people still actively negotiate and use Buddhism in the world right.?

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Rongdao: And that we are not in the position to judge. I think I find that sometimes students have the tendency to... Students are usually very open minded and they are willing to learn and listen. But often you also find that if you allow them, they would just rush to a conclusion and say, "all right I get this... but these are rituals, these are superstitions, and real Buddhism has no place for superstition"... And this is when you explain over a century and a half of campaign even within the the Buddhist traditions themselves to really stamp out these quote unquote "superstitious practices".

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Rongdao: So in other words, the war on, I would say rituals and so on, did not just happen in the academic discourse on Buddhism, and hence I think we're doubly responsible as scholars to teach about these things in a university classroom so that students don't run around having that like Colonial and puritanical understanding of Buddhism and just telling people what is and is not Buddhism.

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Rongdao: And I also I do not want, for instance, heritage students, students who grew up in a say culturally Buddhist household to go home and say, "Mom and Dad, that is not Buddhism that you are doing there"... Right. So in other words...

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Sarah: Though I mean I'm sure you have heard that right? I've also heard students say "oh my parents are Buddhist but what they do isn't real Buddhism".

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Rongdao: Yes. Yes. So then certainly there's this like tension in between your students who are a bit sometimes embarrassed about their own cultural Buddhist practice, and the kind of inherently racist assumptions in defining and accepting what is and what is not Buddhism. And on the other hand you have people have done mindfulness and who would tell you that it is absolutely not a religion and so on and so forth, and then sometimes you know that tension is there on the first day of class. But then again this tension doesn't have to be destructive, because this tension is also an opportunity to really have a conversation about not just the field, but how we understand the world around us and our place in it, and also others' place in this world that we share with everyone.

00:32:07:23 - 00:32:19:09

Sarah: What's a big concept that informs your teaching? Or that you want students to be able to to remember afterwards? What do you hope that they take away from your teaching?

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Rongdao: That is very very good question. I was just speaking with a colleague, well actually a graduate student the other day about how if you teach a big introductory course on Asian religions or Buddhism or whatnot you usually end up with say a lot of science students. Engineering students, students from the business school and so on. And, yes they might be there for the elective credit that they need to graduate, which to me is totally fine. But if you think of how this is probably the one or two like, only course in the humanities that the students would ever take in his or her university career... Seriously, that is an amazing opportunity to really introduce something interesting and enlightening even that students will take with them years after they graduate. Coming back to the more immediate question itself.

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Rongdao: I'm a social historian. So both in my own research work and in my teaching, maybe I repeat that too many times, and I always want to make sure that students understand that conversations, discourse, commentaries, doctrinal interpretations and so and so forth do not emerge in a vacuum, that there is a reason why people are having that kind of conversation that they did in a written text, in a social context and so on and so forth.

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Rongdao: To me it is extremely important that we are very very very sensitive and mindful and of course critical of the kind of social, cultural context in which many many conversations

emerge. So I think at the very heart of my teaching is this idea that everything has to be contextualized, there is a reason why people are having the kind of discussion that they did, and it is as important to know about the context that it is about the content itself.

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Sarah: So maybe even that student who's coming to your class with that "Buddhism is a philosophy not a religion", the important question is why do you think that and what's the context that has produced that in your mind as the right idea?

00:35:10:19 - 00:36:40:04

Rongdao: This would open the door for I would say a very meaningful conversation on secular modernity and neo-colonialism that produced this idea that Buddhism is not a religion. So it's very central to my pedagogy, to my teaching, is this idea that Buddhists throughout history, whatever time period that we focus on or we specialize in, want to be able to draw meaning from their own engagement with their own tradition. Be it at the ritual level, be it at the textual level, so on and so forth. To me the most fascinating part of studying say the history of Buddhism in twentieth century China is to continue to discover the creativity and passion, the kind of devotion that Buddhists show in wanting to make not just their religious tradition meaningful, but to draw meaning from their religious traditions in order to face whatever challenges that they have in their life and so on and so forth. Then in terms of teaching, I think that contextualization should always be taken into consideration.

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Rongdao: I mean students often come into class already having this slight presupposition about how Buddhism is a philosophy, and then you know you want to do Madhyamaka, you want to emptiness, you want to read the texts and so on and so forth. But to me, we can do all that but let's talk about why Nagarjuna wrote the way he did and and so on and so forth.

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Sarah: And then are there any beginner things? Like in your intro courses, are there any concepts, Buddhist concepts that you really love sharing with students? I mean I think for students who don't know much or don't have a lot of assumptions yet, actually just teaching about like Bodhicitta, the idea that we all have the potential for enlightenment. If you share that with you know, young, hungry potentially lost 18 year olds, isn't there kind of a potential huge power there?

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Rongdao: Yes, yes. I think we have to give students a lot more credit than that because I think a lot of the students, at least from my own experience already know a lot about these amazing inspiring powerful concepts in Buddhism. Non-duality, emptiness, Bodhicitta, Buddha nature, this ability or this potential that we all have which makes us all equal and so on.

00:38:23:23 - 00:39:16:04

Rongdao: Then of course for us, for me as a teacher, my job is to really have them, like I say, unpack and contextualize. But I do have a kind of mantra that I do usually at the beginning of every Buddhism class. I look around at students and go, if you have to learn a few things about Buddhism that you don't already know when you signed up for this class, number one, the Buddhist tradition talks about suffering. A lot. A whole lot, probably more than you can handle... And to explain the whole idea of dukkha, because I really think that that is important in thinking about all these later doctrinal developments right.

00:39:16:09 - 00:39:57:10

Rongdao: And at the same time to be kind of humorous and in saying that, here's another thing that you probably should walk out of this class you know having in mind, which is that the majority of Buddhists in the world probably don't meditate as much as you would like them to... To kind of like debunk some of these conceptions or misconceptions that people have. I think teaching is about constructing and deconstructing, you got to take down certain things before you can rebuild others and so to me, it continues to be a very very rewarding journey.

00:40:00:09 - 00:40:16:07

Sarah: I wonder, are you willing to share with us how other nuns in your order talk to you about your role, this dual role as a professor or a teacher? I mean this must be, unusual, difficult terrain sometimes?

00:40:16:25 - 00:41:16:23

Rongdao: I come from a very very small relatively conservative nuns-only order, and of course you know order in the Chinese Buddhist caste is probably not the right word to use... So the only support that I got in pursuit of my graduate training, for example, was that no one stopped me, and to this day I don't think anyone has a clue what I do. I mean I have the most loving nuns within the order, and they love me unconditionally. I don't think they get it and I don't think they care to be quite honest, and in their mind it's just like, OK so she'll do this thing for however many years she wants, but eventually she's going to come back and be a Dharma teacher.

00:41:17:02 - 00:41:22:19

Sarah: You'll just come back, publish a bunch for them, or be the best Dharma teacher...

00:41:24:27 - 00:41:31:16

Rongdao: You just come back and take over and be a Dharma teacher. So then you know, your rebellious phase will pass, something like that

00:41:33:25 - 00:41:49:12

Sarah: I did want to take the chance to talk to you also about graduate teaching. What do you think is important as we train graduate students in Buddhist Studies? By converse, what are things that we shouldn't repeat as patterns that have been a bit established sometimes?

00:41:50:06 - 00:42:30:08

Rongdao: At the graduate level I teach... As someone who specializes in the modern period of course I teach a lot of modern Buddhism. But because of my appointment, institutional appointment, I also teach a lot of courses in the pre-modern period. Whether its the Chinese religious traditions or Buddhism, and regardless of what time period or what method, it could be like a course reading primary texts, which is one course that I'm doing this semester, reading primary texts in Chinese religions, in pre-modern Chinese religions.

00:42:30:12 - 00:43:30:17

Rongdao: Biography, hagiography, ghost stories and so on. Or I also teach a course on modern Buddhism, Buddhism in the modern world. But regardless of the time period or the focus of the course I really think that at the graduate level it is absolutely necessary that students know about how we came to be who we are as a discipline, why certain languages are taught, why certain texts receive more attention than others, whose Buddhist canon that we are talking about here. Every time when we say classical Buddhism is only studied at the universities, whose classical Buddhism are we talking about here and are we trying to preserve here?

00:43:31:01 - 00:44:00:17

Rongdao: So to me it is only responsible to produce in the next generation of scholars this awareness for where we came from. And as to where we are going to go collectively, I really think that I only believe in diversity. The more diverse our approaches, the healthier the discipline is going to be, and the better.

00:44:01:23 - 00:44:09:17

Sarah: So it's not wrong then to take stock and say, "wait a second, look back, maybe we have not asked enough questions".

00:44:09:19 - 00:44:43:11

Rongdao: In fact, I kind of want to make that a requirement. I want every single one of my graduate students to be able to sit down, and read and think about the history of the very field that we are in. And the same thing can be said about Area Studies. You know how was Asian or East Asian studies started, and why are we doing it this way and what are some of the assumptions? And importantly, who are the earliest scholars of, say, Chinese studies? Where did they get their funding from?

00:44:44:11 - 00:44:48:12

Sarah: Where did they get their funding from? I don't know... Are these things you know? That you have answers for?

00:44:53:25 - 00:45:44:10

Rongdao: Well most of the first generation of Area Study scholars were employed or get their funding from the State Department, during the cold war. You need to learn the language of your enemies before you can engage with them or defeat them. So then I think both East Asian studies or Asian Studies, and Buddhist Studies come with their own disciplinary baggage, the elephant in the room that we all need to be able to at least be willing to acknowledge, if not

fully address in moving forward so that students do not privilege a certain approach, or we do not reinforce or reproduce a certain conception about the field moving forward.

00:45:44:12 - 00:45:55:24

Sarah: Yeah. Which comes back to that idea you had, that beautiful phrase that teaching is both constructing and deconstructing. You need to break things up to allow people to rebuild.

00:45:58:06 - 00:46:29:15

Rongdao: And we can always rebuild with the same bricks. We don't have to throw away all the rocks and the bricks and the beams and so on and so forth, but to me it's not a one time thing. We keep challenging our assumptions, we repeatedly take them out and then we repeatedly at least try to reconstruct. To me it's in the process of deconstructing and reconstructing that I hope that the meanings emerge.

00:46:29:28 - 00:46:38:25

Sarah: Well on that note, that feels like a natural closure to our conversation. So thank you so much for taking the time today to meet with us on The circled square.

00:46:39:00 - 00:46:39:27

Rongdao: And thanks for having me.

00:46:46:03 - 00:46:52:25

Sarah: You can find more information about Rongdao's research and publications on her profile page at McGill University. We'll post a link in the show notes.

00:46:53:07 - 00:47:14:27

Sarah: Show notes and transcripts are available on our website at teachingbuddhism.net. If you've enjoyed this, we would love to hear from you. Please let us know over social media or email, and we invite you to subscribe to this podcast through Apple or Stitcher, or wherever it is you get your podcasts. A very special thanks to Dr. Betsy Moss for recording, editing, and producing this amazing podcast.

00:47:14:29 - 00:47:22:12

Sarah: This podcast comes out of the Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation Center for Buddhist Studies, at the University of Toronto. Thanks for listening, and be well.