

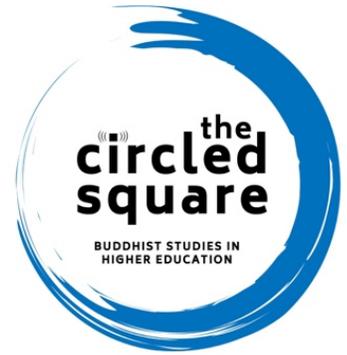
Episode 10: Luther Obrock, Constructing Buddhist Theories

File Length: 00:45:39

Speakers

Sarah Richardson

Luther Obrock



00:00:00:11 - 00:00:03:28

Luther: Well I mean my theory is an imaginary relationship to a real problem.

00:00:08:18 - 00:00:14:25

Sarah: Hello and welcome to this episode of The Circled Square, the podcast where we talk about teaching Buddhist studies in higher education.

00:00:14:27 - 00:00:55:10

Sarah: My name is Sarah Richardson and I teach at the University of Toronto. In this episode I sat down with Dr. Luther Obrock, a professor of South Asian religions in the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Toronto Mississauga. This episode is called Constructing Buddhist Theories of the Body From Ancient Texts: A Seminar. This was about a topical seminar Luther was in the midst of teaching for the second time, where he was focusing his students, mostly undergrads, on early Buddhist texts and translation, and helping them mine terms and sections related to bodies, and gender, and using this to help students understand an ancient Indian and Buddhist concept of the body.

00:00:55:12 - 00:01:24:14

Sarah: Now, we recorded this interview back in December of 2019, before this present pandemic has really changed a lot of how we teach and why we teach. So even though so much has changed and we're kind of super saturated, I think, many of us in thinking about teaching modalities, and what we should translate into the new formats we're gonna take up, it's also so refreshing to go back to thinking about course content and research skills, which really never get old. So enjoy.

00:01:26:23 - 00:01:28:28

Sarah: Hi Luther. Welcome to The Circled Square.

00:01:29:00 - 00:01:31:00

Luther: Well thank you for having me here.

00:01:31:02 - 00:01:36:18

Sarah: I'm so thrilled that you're able to speak with us today. Could you start by introducing yourself, starting with, "my name is..."?

00:01:36:20 - 00:02:09:09

Luther: OK, Sure. My name is Luther Obrock and I'm a professor here at the University of Toronto. I teach in the Department for the Study of Religion and also in Historical Studies. My main area of specialization is Sanskrit, Sanskrit literature, but I also have a deep and abiding interest in Buddhism, especially the social history of Buddhism. So I tend to approach things in ancient South Asia from both the language perspective, I was trained philologically, but then also I'm interested in what we might call questions of social history.

00:02:09:29 - 00:02:12:22

Sarah: And what do you mean by social history? What does that mean for you?

00:02:13:12 - 00:02:39:14

Luther: Well what that means for me is trying to recover practices, ideas, contexts that underlie the texts. So when we deal with ancient South Asia we have many many texts, and to try to think through what was the world in which these texts were meaningful, to me is absolutely essential to the questions that I want to ask about the ancient South Asian past.

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Luther: So when you read something like the Pali Canon or Sanskrit Kavya literature, whatever, these things, I want to see like what world produced these, and what did these texts say within that world.

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Sarah: And so for our listeners who may not be familiar when you say Sanskrit Kavya literature, what does that mean? What is Kavya? It's a form of meter, right?

00:03:00:16 - 00:03:44:28

Luther: Well, Kavya is a Sanskrit word that means what a Kavi or a poet does, is Kavya. So we might define it as Sanskrit ornate literature, and this is one of my first loves. As a Sanskrit student I was always charmed and baffled by it so I kept reading more and more. So this was largely the area of my specialization when I was studying Sanskrit. Again Sanskrit Kavya literature we might think of this as something that has nothing to do with the religious world or the Buddhist world, but then again there are amazing Buddhist kavyas and kavyas that deal with religious themes. So it's a very important body or genre of texts for people to look at and study and enjoy.

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Sarah: Another kind of follow up question on your specific interests, when you talk about "early South Asian history" what does that mean? What's early? Where are the lines of early for you?

00:03:56:22 - 00:04:41:01

Luther: Well that's another really good question, and I have to say that my own research specialization now is something that we would not consider early in South Asia. So I'm very much interested in second millennium Sanskrit literature, so things after 1000 CE. However, what I am talking about when I'm talking about early texts, which I think we'll talk about a little

bit more today, are things created in the few centuries before and after the turn of the common era. So we'll basically say from the time of the Buddha in the middle of the first millennium BCE to we'll say 500 CE.

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Sarah: OK, OK a good thousand years.

00:04:42:26 - 00:04:51:24

Luther: A good thousand years, that's the fun thing about studying South Asia. You say "ah this person, this text was probably from somewhere between 300 BCE and 200 CE," about five hundred years...

00:04:53:12 - 00:05:21:05

Sarah: We wanted to talk to you especially about your recent course on Buddhism and the body. So you recently designed and taught an upper level undergraduate course on Buddhism and the body at the University of Toronto. And in your syllabus you described this as a course that was considering Buddhist ideas on the body, particularly gendered bodies, and then you were asking how these were constructed and disciplined. So can you explain a bit more for our listeners what this course concept was?

00:05:22:01 - 00:06:51:13

Luther: Yeah. So actually this is the second time that I've taught this course, but the first time I taught it purely in regards to Buddhism. The first iteration of the course was thinking through early Indic texts, both Buddhist and Brahminical, so things like the Vedas, the Upanishads, as well as the Pali Canon, this was the arrangement of the first course. But then that course was so interesting to me that I decided to focus largely on the early Buddhist tradition, and why I chose to think through the body was that it really gave an opportunity to think through things that are very salient I think to the study of social history, and also very salient to where we are in the modern world to think through things like gender, sexuality, material, and religious practice. And I think all of these things coalesce around ideas about the body, technologies involving the body, and discourses surrounding what the body does in the social world. So that's kind of where I was going with that. So I also wanted it to be an opportunity for students to talk about the way in which these very same themes through which we can interrogate early Buddhist texts we can also use to talk about our own contemporary society.

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Sarah: So it sort of sounds like you were interested in questions that are already interesting to your students, but then looking for those questions in, finding answers for them with early Buddhist texts?

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Luther: Yeah. And actually I found my students got very very excited to read through and think through these things.

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Sarah: That's great. So how did you locate bodies for students? Because when you're dealing with early Indian materials or early Indian texts for the most part, how did you find the category of bodies for them? Were there specific terms that you were looking for, or were there specific texts that you already had in mind when you brought this topic to students?

00:07:31:00 - 00:07:59:26

Luther: Well if I can answer that question by means of a kind of larger contextualization in terms of the history of Buddhism and especially how Buddhism is taught, Buddhism is largely seen as a kind of mental and spiritual tradition. So we talk about things like mindfulness, and early Buddhism tends to be taught in terms of mental exercises, if you will. I mean, we can we can talk about this, what I mean by this more later on.

00:07:59:28 - 00:09:25:01

Luther: thAnd then of course as you go through time, you end up going through Mahayana and then you end up with Tantric Buddhism and there, that's when you get all the weird ritual, that's when you get all the ideas of sexuality, sex, the body, these things become much more salient and talked about when we get to Tantric Buddhism. However, when you actually read early Buddhist texts, you're struck at how actually embodied the discussions in the Pali Canon actually is. So what I was trying... Actually it wasn't very hard to recover it. What I really did was just look through some of the very famous scriptures, certain famous texts, and just tried to put the question, let's just imagine these texts as coming from embodied people, people in bodies and then all of a sudden it made so much sense to talk about it in such a way. And of course then there are other texts that are incredibly outside of the Buddhavachana, or the words of the Buddha, outside of that there are so many texts like the Therigatha that talk about the personal experiences of early monks and nuns, that also really locate this in their own life story, in their own embodied imagination of religion, of themselves, of their place in the world. So really the texts themselves, it wasn't hard to find.

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Sarah: There were a lot of bodies in those texts.

00:09:27:11 - 00:09:49:06

Luther: A lot of bodies in those texts and also just how important it was in the text themselves, and I'll give you one example. They spent so much time in these Pali texts talking about what the Buddha's body was like and how this was a sign of his extraordinary status.

00:09:49:08 - 00:09:57:10

Luther: So there's one famous story where some Brahmins come and see the Buddha teaching and they're like, "oh you know that sounds really good", sorry I'm paraphrasing here...

00:09:57:12 - 00:09:58:15

Sarah: Is this the Therigatha?

00:09:59:18 - 00:10:03:12

Luther: No no, this is... Oh man I should get... I can get the reference.

00:10:03:14 - 00:10:05:29

Sarah: OK, but it's a description of the Buddha?...

00:10:06:19 - 00:11:04:13

Luther: Yeah. So it was a description of the Buddha preaching, and then these these these Brahmins say, you know, "this was really really great, this was really interesting. However, I'm not really sure you're really a great person", and then of course the Buddha sticks out his tongue, touches both ears with it and then covers his forehead, and then they say "OK, well obviously we'll become the Buddha's followers". So at this point you say, that was odd, in a certain way, because we're taught that the Buddha, or we kind of imagine that the Buddha teaches through logical persuasion, and that the Buddha teaches some sort of mental way of being in the world, whereas for these Brahmins what actually was the thing that tipped the scale for them is the fact that the Buddha had a long and broad tongue, which is of course one of the marks of a great man in something like the Lakkhana Sutta, or something like that. The Lakkhana Sutta of course is a text that tells the marks of the Buddha, of a great man.

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Luther: And these things are marks of the Buddha, are tied to the marks of the Emperor, so there's this certain sort of discourse about the masculine body and the body of a powerful man that is really deeply ingrained in these early texts.

00:11:19:11 - 00:11:31:18

Sarah: Yeah, you describe something called the hyper-masculine body that you found throughout examples in the Pali Canon. So what did you mean by that? What was hyper-masculine in the examples you found in the early Pali Canon?

00:11:32:10 - 00:12:49:22

Luther: The idea of the hyper masculine body, I think, it's something that's very much there that the Buddha has to be seen as manly. John Powers' book, A Bull of a Man really tries to lay out how the idea of masculinity is absolutely essential to the construction of the Buddha and the way in which he acts in the world. And I think drawing upon Powers' work is a really good way to kind of think through this. So if you look at the way in which the Buddha is described in the Pali Canon, they do things like the Lakkhana Sutta where they talk about the actual physical marks, what his arms look like, what his chest looks like, what his back looks like... His back is like a crystal slab or something like that, it's completely smooth, there's no lines on it, you know they are very specific about this masculine gendered body and it is always masculine gendered. So again there's this idea of the Buddha having a sheathed penis and they always talk about how he has a sheathed penis in a certain way.

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Luther: And again this this also comes up in many times, or in one particular instance in the Buddha's teaching where a monk gets obsessed with the Buddha's body and just demands, or just follows the Buddha in order to see the Buddha's body until finally the Buddha says, "OK you're getting a bit obsessed here, I'll show you myself and all my naked glory", and then this monk's desires were quenched and he went away happy, but there's a certain idea of the actual embodied form of the Buddha as this masculine character. Now this is also tied to certain sorts of, you might say heterosexual descriptions of the Buddha, so that of course he's masculine enough to get married, to have all these women in his harem, and to father a son. This seems very important to the whole story of the Buddha as well. So the way in which the Buddha is described, both in his form and in his role in society, both his physical body as well as his action as this kind of kingly character, this masculine character, this head of a household character that leaves it all for this path but still retains these masculine qualities as the leader of this new sort of social formation I think is very interesting, that in order to lead the social formation he must also carry forward all these masculine traits. And that's what I mean by hyper-masculine.

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Sarah: What were other kind of foci then that you could locate? There was the hyper-masculine body, you also looked at women, right? You looked at the male and female gender binary. So my first question is, what was a good example for students to understand the gendered female body in the Pali Canon? And then I wanted to also ask about whether the texts kept you in that binary?... Because many of our students now are aware of the continuity in terms of gender, there are many options beyond two.

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Luther: Well yes, those are both very good questions and first of all I want to say that I wanted to read these texts and have the students read these texts not as conforming to our own ideas of masculinity or femininity or gender roles or these sorts of binaries which are so incredibly pervasive in the way in which we see and act in the world.

00:15:28:06 - 00:15:55:14

Luther: Gender is important, sexuality is important in these texts, however, these things are also very different. For instance, the whole thing about the Buddha's body, the masculine body of the Buddha is very different than what we might see as a hyper-masculine body in our day to day life. I mean this is another question that we can talk about a little bit more. So I also wanted to see the way in which the texts themselves drew those lines, and the way in which the tradition itself drew those lines.

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Sarah: And of course then there's something pedagogically effective with showing students that "masculine" could look, and was described really differently in 5th century India.

00:16:06:15 - 00:16:42:28

Luther: Definitely, and also masculine acts, being a man in the world is of course socially conditioned and this is why we can also use the Buddhist texts as theory to think about our own

positionality, that we don't just get to interrogate Buddhist texts through our own tools, but we can also see what sorts of ideas the Buddhist texts themselves might offer up. But to return to your text about women, I think this is really important because... Charles Hallisey has recently re-translated the Therigatha, beautifully I might add...

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Sarah: And the Therigatha is?

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Luther: I think it's translated as The Songs of the First Buddhist Women, or something like that. So the Therigatha, so its the songs, the gatha, of the theris, so these female monks and female elders, nuns... And this is absolutely an extraordinary document in which we hear something of a female voice navigating Buddhism, and navigating becoming a follower of the Buddha, and the way in which their life stories become intertwined within this religious movement. So those texts are great ways to see the way in which women interacted with this tradition that I just laid out as being founded and being kind of embedded in certain ideas of masculinity. So those texts were were really important.

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Luther: So if I can go back a little bit to the history of the study of Buddhism in the west, one of the most fascinating things about Pali Buddhism is many of the first scholars of Pali Buddhism were women from the west. Many of the first translators and people who published on these texts were women, and that I think is something that we should really think through and actually...

00:18:08:04 - 00:18:10:26

Sarah: I'm curious who are the women who were important early translators for the Pali texts?

00:18:10:28 - 00:18:18:02

Luther: Like I.B. Horner, I forget her first name, Rhys-Davids, the husband and wife team. I.B Horner of course translated the Vinaya Pitaka...

00:18:24:23 - 00:18:31:29

Sarah: These women, so are you suggesting that sort of their positionality as women influenced what they saw in the translations?

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Luther: I'm actually saying something similar, because when these texts were first being brought out to a western audience, we're talking late 19th early 20th century, these texts were in many ways sold as egalitarian texts, much more egalitarian than the Brahminical or Hindu religion, or these other sorts of ideas, within the text themselves they have a more egalitarian, democratic, whatever sort of positionality. And in doing so, these scholars have been critiqued of falling into this Protestantism trap etc. etc. Like "true Buddhism is devoid of ritual, it's very egalitarian and nobody cares about bodies because it's all about this mental state"...

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Sarah: And to some extent then, kind of constructing this myth of Buddhism being a religion of the mind, and a philosophy, and purity...

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Luther: And the text... It's a textual religion, people sit and read it, then you think about it, and that's what you do.

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Sarah: Yeah, and it's a cognitive relationship.

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Luther: Yeah. So in many ways though, these women were advocating for something rather radical in their own scholarship which was actually to say like women do have a place in religion. And again this is true for early Buddhism, we do have these amazing texts like the Therigatha that have these female voices, however the texts themselves are much more ambiguous and ambivalent towards the role of females within the tradition itself.

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Luther: To give one example of course, there's a very famous example, Ananda, Buddha's main disciple, is always shown to be this great defender of women and trying to include more women within the sangha and the Buddha says "Ok yeah fine, Ananda, we'll let in women, but now Buddhism is only going to last half as long as it would have..." And of course then we have all these rules that the highest nun is under the lowest monk, and so there's ways in which women were included and given a voice in very interesting ways, however, the tradition, the textual tradition itself also shows strong biases against women having real power. Now again I'm not saying this is how it was, but I'm saying the texts themselves show this complex negotiation.

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Sarah: How do you guide your students into reading these texts? And if you're trying to locate like a kind of broader historiography of those texts, how can they hold that complicated like the reception history as well as the texts together?... Yeah, Those are complicated projects that you're trying to share with students, right? Ones that some of us are going to spend lifetimes trying to disentangle, both what we've received from what we know and how we know it. So what's a way that you can help students sort of put these texts into the context?

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Luther: That's a very good question and it's one that I struggle with as I teach constantly, and also I learn every time I read these texts again, I learn every time I teach them because actually the students are teaching me as well. But the things that I think are really useful are to read the primary texts themselves slowly, carefully, and with a kind of open mind towards questions, "what doesn't make sense?", "how can we understand what's going on here?", and to talk

about them as a group together. Then I like to pair this sort of close reading with some modern scholars work, to provide some sort of guidance that we can bounce our ideas off of. So for instance, I mentioned John Powers' book *A Bull of a Man*, and I assigned the beginning chapters of that book because I found it was it was accessible to students, it also kind of provided a social background, a narrative, but then it also allowed the students to get this background to explore it further, to question further, to understand more.

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Luther: Again I think it's important to pair these texts with interpretive texts so we can see what other scholars are doing and we can try to understand what lineages these scholars are coming out of so that you see different perspectives.

00:22:54:11 - 00:23:11:01

Sarah: Do you show them different translations of the same type of text? Do you ever try that? Because I mean of course translation itself is, as you've highlighted, so contextual right. We're always choosing the terms that fit our present needs or interests in some sense. So has that been a tool you've used?

00:23:11:03 - 00:23:59:05

Luther: You know, I haven't. And that might be a good thing too to look at. But I tend to use just a single translation because, the words can be very important and sometimes I'll go back to the primary texts and try to flag a certain number of words or terms that are important, but I really think that usually in translation the ideas that come out often provide that impetus, that students can understand what's at stake without getting caught in the details, and I can't believe I'm saying that as a philologist but I actually think these larger questions become very important about how these texts are framed, what is going on in these texts, how the community of monks is acting, how the Buddha adjudicates cases... These sorts of ideas.

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Sarah: And then the historiographical question... You've talked already quite a bit about this complicated history of our reception of Buddhism that's still very much colors what students come to our classes assuming to be true about the tradition. Do you foreground the reception history of nineteenth century translations their context vs. more modern translations in their context?

00:24:24:29 - 00:25:41:27

Luther: Usually what I try to do in this course, I'm not trying to make this historiography class. It's an undergraduate class... At a graduate level I think that would be a very important question to address. However what I try to do, and I mean I'll introduce this in my opening remarks to whatever we're reading, but what I'm trying to look at is specific snapshots within Buddhist social history, so talking about something like nuns, for instance, and looking at a few texts as being indicative of certain questions that we might approach this situation with. So for instance, when we talk about nuns, we can read something like the the Vinaya Pitaka, the part that gives rules for nuns, which gives one particular sort of... I'll just use the word imagination for how

women should act in a Buddhist context. And I'll try to pair that with the Therigatha which has another very different sort of positionality about how nuns act within an early Buddhist monastic context.

00:25:42:02 - 00:26:24:19

Luther: And in that we can see that there's different sorts of issues at play and there's not just simply one way of being a nun, and that's the Vinaya Pitaka, because that's the rules... You know we can also think about different sorts of subjectivities to get a more complex notion of what nuns are like, because I often think that when we have ancient texts we tend to take the rulebooks as this is how things were, and then the other stuff is kind of literary imaginations, whereas I want to see both as deeply historically contingent, and I think by reading things like this next to each other you can begin to see this sort of complexity without trying to make an argument about western genealogies of study, that these things become apparent by taking the texts themselves seriously.

00:26:24:21 - 00:26:34:27

Luther: And for the students, I think these texts themselves tell the story in a much more vivid way than reading a lot of stuff about the history of Buddhist studies in the west.

00:26:34:29 - 00:26:49:05

Sarah: You've talked somewhat about helping your students see these as theories of the body. Is it difficult for your students at an undergraduate level to understand early Sanskrit texts in translation as a locus of theory?

00:26:50:05 - 00:27:18:10

Luther: Well I think by reading these texts carefully you begin to see this, because what I mean by theory is different sorts of productive ideological imaginations through which problems are discussed. What I mean by theory is like an imaginary relationship to a real problem, so that women within the Buddhist Sangha is a real life issue within the Sangha... How are these things to be included?

00:27:18:20 - 00:28:05:19

Luther: Then these texts provide, what we might say, the ideologies for this inclusion, this imaginary relationship to this real problem. So like how do we actually understand that? So we get some things that say we need all these extra rules for nuns, we need to make sure there's a definite hierarchy. That's one sort of theoretical, if you will, ideological approach to the way in which women acted within Buddhism. But it is not the only way. When we see these Therigatha texts we see, within the female voice, other ways of being included within these other relationships that also provide ways in which to see gender relationships within the early Buddhist community.

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Luther: And I think reading those side by side, this is what I mean by theory, that we can see these relationships and try to draw these out to understand these different sorts of

positionalities that can help us understand the ways in which gender relationships work within our own contemporary society, these things that are largely invisible to us because we swim in these things, it may seem very strange within these ancient Buddhist texts, however once you begin to pull that apart you can get a sense of our own foreignness.

00:28:38:15 - 00:29:09:03

Sarah: I'm going to switch gears a bit and ask about some of the technology of how you teach about this in the classroom. We get together usually for two hours a week, right? And we sit in a room slash do whatever we want in a room, and I think your courses are largely discussion based in those two hours, right? So you've got your students preparing for this class by doing readings, and then they come and discuss topics, but I saw on your syllabus that you also have them doing presentations. So what were those about? What kinds of topics did you give students to present on?

00:29:09:08 - 00:29:54:10

Luther: Usually what I would have the students do... I would have primary readings and secondary readings, and usually what I would make the students do is present on the primary readings and then begin leading the conversation so that we would all talk through the secondary readings after they had done that, but I wanted them to try to see what questions they would see as pertinent within the primary readings, and also having their peers lead this conversation can be sometimes difficult, but I think it really adds to the conversation to see what the students are actually finding interesting within these primary texts. And again, of course is secondary material kind of frames the question, but I would have them introduce it and lead the discussion.

00:29:54:29 - 00:30:05:19

Sarah: Did any of them ever surprise you greatly and have a question, draw out a question that you hadn't seen before? Or have had a totally different focus than what you would have brought to?

00:30:05:26 - 00:31:39:16

Luther: Constantly. I'm trying to think of a precise example. One does not really spring to mind right now but I can say the texts that were probably the most fun, and this may be shocking to people, but is the Vinaya Pitaka, like people got into going through the Vinaya Pitaka, especially looking at rules of conduct, and just trying to understand what is the organization here, why are there all these rules, these rules are horrifying, why are some things offenses and other things not offenses, to try to figure out the logic here. I think that was the part for me that was the most interesting just because I was like, "oh you know students are going to find this really boring". No, they loved it and they really went through and found incongruities that when we discussed them I think brought a lot out, because basically what happens in the Vinaya Pitaka for those who don't know this text is there'll be a story, usually one long story that will begin a section, and then it'll be adjudicated by the Buddha as an offense or not, and then there'll be smaller sub-stories that just go on and on and on that kind of have the same general theme, and then the Buddha at the end of all of them says "you're either kicked out", "you're

censured", or "it's fine". So you'll see this kind of weird pattern, some things are fine, and some things are terrible offenses, but to try to figure out the logic behind this...

00:31:39:19 - 00:31:55:18

Sarah: What was one of the stories or the incongruities that the students found strange or surprising? Is there one story... I assume these are stories of people having done things wrong, right? Possibly. And the the Buddha is going to decide whether?...

00:32:00:22 - 00:32:25:29

Luther: So you know there are four kind of, I hesitate to use the word sin, but we'll say... There are four deeds that will get kicked out of the sangha, and these are sex, killing someone, theft, and claiming to have spiritual attainments that you don't actually have. Those are the four, and by far the longest is sex.

00:32:27:12 - 00:32:30:29

Sarah: The longest meaning the one about which there is the most content written?

00:32:31:01 - 00:33:08:22

Luther: Yeah the most content is the part on sex because I guess killing people is a lot easier to understand whether it's bad or good or something like that. But they'll just be all these stories and they'll be just so... I don't want to be pejorative, but they're sometimes rather shocking, these stories that the Buddha adjudicates about sexual misconduct, and seeing which ones are actually reasons for being expelled and which ones aren't. It's very it's very fascinating.

00:33:08:24 - 00:33:10:07

Sarah: These are mostly stories of monks, right?

00:33:11:16 - 00:33:13:20

Luther: Mostly stories of monks. Absolutely.

00:33:14:15 - 00:33:16:22

Sarah: Sexual relationships against their will, or?

00:33:16:28 - 00:33:44:16

Luther: Sometimes it's against their will, sometimes it's very much according to their will, but then you see, to give an example, well what if it's a dead body, what if it's not a living person. Is that an offense? What if it's just a pile of bones, does that count? These are all stories that are within the Vinaya Pitaka. For those of you who haven't read it I highly recommend you go out and read it. It might be somewhat surprising to read what's in the Vinaya Pitaka.

00:33:48:17 - 00:34:02:02

Sarah: So beyond your presentations, you also had them write two papers, two short-ish papers. I mean, six to eight page papers, which are not short actually, for undergraduate

students it's pretty long. Did you assign topics for those or did you help students find their own topics?

00:34:02:04 - 00:35:12:07

Luther: Well I assigned a broad theme, and then I also said that they had to use the primary... I didn't want them to go out and do their own research, but I wanted them to find a theme that they were interested in. So basically I said you must use the primary sources that are in the syllabus and you have to use, for the first paper, two, and for the last one, four primary sources to build your argument, and you must frame them in terms of the secondary sources that we looked at, but you have to make your own argument within the texts. So I gave them a very broad question to investigate because I wanted there to be a balance between having them use the material from the course creatively and productively, and also do something that they found interesting, because I didn't want them to just go off to the library because who knows what would come out of that with. I actually wanted this to be very focused on the sources. And actually some of the papers were just... It's really interesting to see what students come up with, what ideas they find productive to think through.

00:35:12:16 - 00:35:39:19

Sarah: And you also asked students to attend non-class events, right? Things that are run by the Center for South Asian Civilizations at U of T Mississauga, and to write sort of critical reflections about them? So what kinds of events were these this term in particular, and was this effective? Why or why not? Because I'm sure in some sense they had to do a bit of extra work to connect a contemporary event to the types of texts you were studying. So how did that go?

00:35:39:29 - 00:36:05:05

Luther: Well first of all I should say that my undergraduate teaching happens at University of Toronto Mississauga which is really a center for the study of South Asia, especially at the undergraduate level, so there's many events that are there. So I wanted to make sure that the students both knew about this, and could also be integrated within these, I find, absolutely wonderful events that are going on.

00:36:05:14 - 00:36:06:18

Sarah: By events, what kinds of things?

00:36:07:27 - 00:36:34:12

Luther: So they'll be mainly things like lectures, different speakers who came in and talked. So for instance, we had two scholars of Pali Buddhism from Pune who were there leading a reading group in Sanskrit, Pali and Tibetan, Lata and Mahesh Deokar. So then they gave a talk, students could go to that to see two scholars from India who actually work on Pali and Sanskrit to see the way in which they approached the text.

00:36:34:15 - 00:37:25:17

Luther: But then again, I didn't want it to be just Buddhist texts or just Buddhist events or just events that were tied to this class. For instance, there was a wonderful lecture that happened

by Nikky-Guninder Singh who talks about feminism and Sikhism, and actually you might think that contemporary feminism, and Sikh studies, and early Buddhism they don't have anything to talk about, but actually, the students themselves who went to the events saw that there was very much that could speak across these, and actually they had developed a vocabulary to talk about and to engage with these other sorts of events. So I really want these courses to be integrated into larger discussions about South Asia and about the themes of the course, about the gender of the body etc.

00:37:26:20 - 00:37:37:29

Sarah: Did your understanding of the topic itself change in the course of this time of teaching? Or how did it evolve if it if we can't point to immediate change?

00:37:40:19 - 00:38:53:01

Luther: Absolutely. So as I mentioned I'm a Sanskritist and I had also done a lot of work in Buddhist texts when I was in graduate school. However, I concentrated mainly on the later phase of Sanskrit Buddhism, Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism were the types of Buddhism that I was most familiar with. Actually teaching this course, I also taught it as a way for me to learn more about early Buddhism and to also really carefully read these Pali texts which are seen as so foundational to Buddhism. But I find oftentimes they're seen as rather guidebooks for meditative practice or whatever, which again, they have a lot of that material but they have so much more to think through, to think through different topics. So I learned so much, and to read these text carefully and look through these texts for these interesting moments and events as ways to understand the social world out of which early Buddhism developed, for me was absolutely fascinating. I felt like a student most of the time too.

00:38:53:17 - 00:39:15:26

Sarah: Hopefully we always are. As one of my final questions I wanted to ask you for a short-ish version of how you got to be here? So describing for us your formation, where you came from, where you started, where you were born, and how you became this person who teaches about early Indian texts in this way?

00:39:16:12 - 00:40:01:03

Luther: Well I was born in Toledo Ohio. Oftentimes the events that changed the course of my life are very small, but somehow very powerful. So I went to undergrad at the University of Tennessee and my very first semester at the University of Tennessee Knoxville I took a class, just because it fit my schedule and it sounded interesting, it was called "Religious Aspects of Modern Indian Literature," and it was taught by a professor named James L. Fitzgerald. And I remember being absolutely fascinated. We read *Kim*, we read *Passage to India*, we read *God of Small Things*, we read *The Guide*, we read *Samskara*, I remember all of the books we read in that course and I just found it absolutely fascinating.

00:40:01:23 - 00:40:32:26

Luther: After the course I went up to speak to Professor Fitzgerald and I said, "I'm very interested in this, do you teach more classes?", He says, "well actually, I do ancient India, I'm a

Sanskritist"... And of course he is a leading expert, if not the leading expert on the Mahabharata. So then we did it, I think I started probably my second semester doing independent reading in the Mahabharata, in translation, and then gradually I started to take Sanskrit, and from there on out I was absolutely hooked.

00:40:32:28 - 00:40:58:11

Luther: So it was a chance encounter in an undergraduate class, and actually was very nice because just a few weeks ago I was lucky enough to go to the **Honda** lecture in Amsterdam which is a large lecture on a topic on South Asia given by a distinguished scholar, and James Fitzgerald, my first Sanskrit professor was there giving this wonderful lecture on the Mahabharata and it was great. It was I don't know I found it a very...

00:40:59:19 - 00:41:00:13

Sarah: You've kept in touch?

00:41:00:16 - 00:41:47:20

Luther: Oh yeah, of course of course we kept in touch yeah. I don't know I was just, it was very nice, because you know he was the person who really put me on this path. And then after University of Tennessee I went to UC Berkeley where my advisor was Robert Goldman, who is a great scholar of the Ramayana, who is translating the Ramayana, and I continued my Sanskrit studies with him, and he was absolutely formative and really taught me Sanskrit. But at Berkeley I was lucky enough to be surrounded by great Buddhist studies scholars, in particular Alexander Von Rospatt who works on South Asian Buddhism, South Asian Nepalese Buddhism, so I read a lot with him as well, so I was very much shaped by my education and by these wonderful scholars that I was able to meet.

00:41:47:27 - 00:42:18:24

Luther: And then from there, my first teaching job was at the University of Pennsylvania where I was a Sanskrit lecturer, and there, the department was wonderful in being open to having me as part of their intellectual community, so I learned so much, especially from Daud Ali who is a great social historian of early South Asia. So I've tried to continue to learn at all of these places. I'm lucky enough to continue my learning here and getting to teach a little bit as well.

00:42:18:26 - 00:42:26:02

Sarah: Yeah. And who knows, in one of these undergraduate courses you might find the next person who wants to continue studying Sanskrit...

00:42:26:07 - 00:42:27:09

Luther: I have no doubt about it.

00:42:27:25 - 00:42:49:28

Sarah: That's the goal, right? Just because it's so beautiful and pleasurable to hear, is there any verse... Since you're such a skilled Sanskritist, I've heard you do Sanskrit before, so is there any

verse that you could share with us? Maybe one that you came across in your class of this term that we've been discussing about Buddhism and the body?

00:42:50:07 - 00:43:28:04

Luther: Oh yeah. So I put this on my syllabus as my kind of way into this topic, and thank you for indulging me, this is one of my favorite verses of all time. It is from the Kumarasambhava, it's from Chapter 5, around 30 or something like that, it goes... (*recites Sanskrit*) it's a beautiful verse which basically means... Well let me tell you the context first.

00:43:28:07 - 00:43:28:29

Sarah: Yeah so who's meeting who, what's going on?

00:43:30:01 - 00:44:37:15

Luther: So Parvati, the goddess Parvati, the daughter of the mountain has been practicing asceticism in order to win Shiva as her husband, and now Shiva shows up in the guise of a Brahmin ascetic and comes to see or approaches Parvati in her ascetic grove, and Parvati says to him this verse, "Is firewood and kindling easy to obtain for your rights? Is there water too that is sufficient for your rights of bathing? Are you practicing tapas to the best of your ability?" And then here's the kicker, here's the line that I really like, he says... "The body indeed is the foremost, is the first instrument of Dharma". So what I really liked about this is to think through the way in which one's body is the way in which Dharma is promulgated and worked through in the world. It's a wonderful and beautiful verse.

00:44:37:17 - 00:44:38:17

Sarah: Thank you for sharing.

00:44:44:04 - 00:45:20:06

Sarah: Thank you for listening to my conversation with Luther. You can find more information about Luther's research and publications on his profile page at the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Toronto Mississauga. We'll post a link in the show notes. Show notes and transcripts are available on our website at teachingbuddhism.net. If you've enjoyed this, we'd love to hear from you. Please let us know over social media or email, and we remind you to subscribe to this podcast through Apple, or Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts. A very special thanks to Dr. Betsy Moss for recording, editing, and producing this podcast.

00:45:20:08 - 00:45:28:12

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