

THE BUDDHIST CANON AND THE CANON OF BUDDHIST STUDIES

OLIVER FREIBERGER

In contemporary academia, the concept of a canon is rather unpopular¹. The word ‘canon’² reminds us of elites who use their power to suppress opposing views by labeling them as non-canonical and heretic. It reminds us of colonialism and ‘Orientalism,’ of the ways Western scholars ‘canonized’ the knowledge of ‘the East.’ And it reminds us of a ‘classical’ canon in education that conservative instructors and politicians attempt to save from postmodern randomness. In Buddhist Studies, such general reservations about the canon appear to become manifest in two demands: In our research, we must focus on sources other than the Buddhist canon; and in teaching, we must abandon the inherited ‘canon’ of class readings, which again consists mainly of Buddhist canonical texts, and must teach contemporary Buddhist practice instead.

In this paper, I will reconsider those demands by reflecting upon the Buddhist canon as a subject of research, and upon our own scholarly canonizations, the secondary canon of Buddhist Studies. The first part of the paper examines the role of the Buddhist canon in research and in teaching, the trend towards non-canonical sources, and the current affection for contemporary practice. As a textual scholar who works with canonical texts, I intend to point to some risks that are, in my view, inherent in that general trend. To corroborate my critique and to illustrate what

¹ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the University of Bayreuth and at the University of Texas at Austin in spring, 2004. I thank the participants of the subsequent discussions for their responses and, in particular, Janice Leoshko for her comments and valuable suggestions.

² The word ‘canon’ is derived from Greek *kanōn*, “cane”, “ruler”, figurative: “rule”, “norm”, “model”. See for the etymology and historical development of the term Gerald T. Sheppard, “Canon,” *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, vol. 3 (New York: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 62-69.

I consider the value of canonical texts for scholarship, I will, in the second part of the paper, examine one exemplary issue: the image of the laity in early Buddhism. I intend to demonstrate that canonical texts are, in contrast to the common view, a rich source for current scholarly interests (such as the issues of religious practice and diversity). I will argue that the image of the canon as being consistent, one-dimensional, and purely normative — an image that underlies the current rejection of canonical texts — is to a large extent the product of a ‘canonization’ carried out by earlier generations of scholars. Discussing further implications in the third part of the paper, I will argue that by excluding the canon, Buddhist Studies runs the risk of canonizing other sources for research and, at the same time, enhances particularism in teaching. Rather, the opposite approach appears to be useful: a roughly ‘canonized’ introductory education in Buddhist Studies, spiced with selected data that are suitable for undermining simplification, and an attitude in research that is open for all kinds of sources, including canonical texts.

1. The Buddhist Canon in Research and in Teaching

When scholars of religion apply the term ‘canon’ to a certain corpus of texts, they usually wish to emphasize two aspects: its normative, authoritative character on the one hand, and its fixed and standardized form on the other³. The latter feature is the result of a process of canonization. Generally speaking, this process begins when within a tradition certain institutions select a limited number of texts and define them as authoritative,

³ Jonathan Z. Smith defines a canon broadly as “the arbitrary fixing of a limited number of ‘texts’ as immutable and authoritative.” “Sacred Persistence: Toward a Redescription of Canon,” id., *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 36-52, here: 44. Gerald Sheppard describes those two aspects as follows: “On the one hand, [the term ‘canon’] can be used to refer to a rule, standard, ideal, norm, or authoritative office or literature, whether oral or written. On the other hand, it can signify a temporary or perpetual fixation, standardization, enumeration, listing, chronology, register, or catalog of exemplary or normative persons, places, or things. The former dimension emphasizes internal signs of an elevated status. The latter puts stress on the precise boundary, limits, or measure of what, from some pre-understood standard, belongs within or falls outside of a specific ‘canon.’” Sheppard, “Canon,” p. 64.

that is, 'canonical.' Subsequently, those or other institutions will need to protect and defend this canon⁴.

Following this definition, scholars of Buddhism are used to labeling certain Buddhist text collections 'canonical.' I focus in this paper on the so-called Pāli canon of the Theravāda school. Although little is known about the formation of the texts after the death of the Buddha, scholarship holds that for a couple of centuries, Buddhists transmitted the constantly increasing text collection orally, until, according to the Theravāda tradition, it was written down for the first time in Sri Lanka, in the 1st century before the Common Era⁵. From the 5th century commentaries onwards, at the latest, both canonical features are observable: the Pāli canon is regarded as normative and authoritative, and its textual contents are defined and fixed.

1.1. *Leaving the Canon Behind: Alternative Sources for Research*

From its very beginning, Western scholarship has focused on the Pāli canonical texts, assuming that historically they were the most reliable source for reconstructing the life of the Buddha, his original teachings, and the new religion's early development. In recent decades, scholars have raised new questions and brought up a number of critical methodological issues: the problem of the alleged objectivity of the scholar; the

⁴ According to Aleida and Jan Assmann, we can distinguish three tasks these institutions have to fulfill: censoring; maintaining the text; and maintaining its meaning (*Zensur, Textpflege, and Sinnpflege*). Censoring means delimitating the text from the extraneous and false; maintaining the text means immunization against change, the orthopraxy of language within the tradition; maintaining the meaning of the text means compensating the semantic deficiencies of the orthopraxy of language, a phenomenon which is often manifest in commentaries of canonical texts. Aleida and Jan Assmann, "Kanon und Zensur," *Kanon und Zensur: Beiträge zur Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation II*, ed. Aleida and Jan Assmann (München: Fink, 1987), pp. 7-27. See also the articles in the same volume by Alois Hahn, "Kanonisierungsstile," pp. 28-37; and Carsten Colpe, "Sakralisierung von Texten und Filiationen von Kanons," pp. 80-92.

⁵ Although it is likely that at this point, the Pāli canon was more or less fixed, we can be fully sure about its actual contents only from Buddhaghosa's commentary in the 5th century onwards. Cf. K.R. Norman, "Buddhism and Canonicity," id., *A Philological Approach to Buddhism: The Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai Lectures 1994* (London: SOAS, 1997); cf. also Gregory Schopen, "Two Problems in the History of Indian Buddhism: The Layman/Monk Distinction and the Doctrines of the Transference of Merit," *SIJ* 10 (1985), 9-47, here: 9f.

need for scholarly interpretation and creativity; the issue of evaluative assessment and normativity; the disputed quest for the original intention of a text's author; the significance of politics and power; and, in particular, the role of the written text in general⁶. A considerable number of scholars have become critical of the traditional, historical-philological paradigm. Emphasizing the obvious multifaceted character of Buddhism and the need for adequate ways to deal with its diversity, they suggest methods other than philological (for example, anthropological, sociological, and art historical methods), and approaches other than historical (such as cross-cultural analysis, feminist criticism, deconstruction, and literary criticism)⁷. The critique of the traditional historical-philological approach concerns, of course, particularly its focus on canonical texts; scholars tend to look for other meaning-producing forms of sources. In the words of José Cabezón: "There is today a call for the increased investigation of alternative semiotic forms — oral and vernacular traditions, epigraphy, ritual, patterns of social and institutional evolution, gender, lay and folk traditions, art, archeology and architecture."⁸

In the course of this trend, the role of the Pāli canon in Buddhist Studies has been subject to critical examination. Charles Hallisey, for example, has analyzed the way Western Buddhologists used to deal with it. He points to the beginnings of Buddhist Studies and their typical 19th century historicist approach "with its split between older and later sources and its positivistic concerns for origins." This approach led scholars to the attitude that unlike modern Buddhists, only Western scholars, due to their knowledge of Pāli, have access to 'original' Buddhism.⁹ Instead of

⁶ José Ignacio Cabezón has thoroughly examined these methodological issues in his article "Buddhist Studies as a Discipline and the Role of Theory," *JIAS* 18 (1995), pp. 231-268. As he convincingly demonstrates, the debate takes place between the two poles of positivist/objectivist and interpretivist/subjectivist/constructionist approaches.

⁷ Cf. Cabezón, "Buddhist Studies as a Discipline...", pp. 238f. and 264f.

⁸ Cf. Cabezón, "Buddhist Studies as a Discipline...", pp. 262f.

⁹ Charles Hallisey, "Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravāda Buddhism," *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 31-61, here: pp. 34-38. Trying to apply a one-sided concept of Orientalism to this issue, however, would be too simple. As Hallisey observes, "there was something like a productive 'elective affinity' between the positivist historiography of European Orientalism and Buddhist styles of self-representation" (p. 43); see also pp. 47-49. This is true also for the common usage of

continuing a scholarly tradition that focuses on the Pāli canon, scholars of Buddhism should examine, according to Hallisey, commentaries, sub-commentaries, and in particular, local contexts and works composed in vernacular languages. He sketches an “alternative historical paradigm which will encourage us to expect meaning to be produced in local circumstances rather than in the origins of the tradition.”¹⁰ In Hallisey’s view, this local production of meaning is of crucial interest for Buddhist Studies, because it reveals the interaction between the text and its users and is thus connected to the ‘real life’ of Buddhists much more closely than the Pāli canon is. Although not explicitly abandoning the canonical texts for research, Hallisey discourages from examining them. The Pāli canon appears as one among many representations of Buddhism, but as a rather unexciting one.

1.2. *Teaching Buddhism without a Canon: The Affection for Contemporary Practice*

It comes as no surprise that the focus on the Pāli canon in research caused an identical focus in teaching. Charles Hallisey remarks that “the study of the Theravāda became equated with the study of the Pāli canon, and it is still common for a student to finish a graduate program in Buddhist Studies without ever having read a Theravādin commentarial text.”¹¹

the commentaries of the Pāli canon; emulating Buddhist tradition, scholars of Buddhism have used them merely as a tool for understanding the canonical text but not as a religious expression of its own right that was composed centuries after the canon itself. In addition to that, several other ways of emulating the Buddhist tradition are observable. Luis Gómez examines similarities in the philological and the scholastic approaches, in the doctrinal commitment, and in the notion of history (decay or culmination). Luis Gómez, “Unspoken Paradigms: Meandering through the Metaphors of a Field,” *JIAS* 18 (1995), pp. 183-230. For the dialectics of orientalism, occidentalism, ‘auto-occidentalism,’ and ‘auto-orientalism’ in (the study of) Asian religions cf. also the recent volume, *Religion im Spiegelkabinett: Asiatische Religionsgeschichte im Spannungsfeld zwischen Orientalismus und Okzidentalismus*, ed. Peter Schalk, Max Deeg, Oliver Freiberger, Christoph Kleine, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis: Historia Religionum 22 (Uppsala: University of Uppsala, 2003); for an outline of this volume see my note, “Religion in mirrors: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Asian Religions,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 4 (2003), pp. 9-17 (online: <http://www.globalbuddhism.org>).

¹⁰ Hallisey, “Roads Taken...,” pp. 50-53.

¹¹ Hallisey, “Roads Taken...,” p. 44.

The text selections in ‘classical’ anthologies of Buddhist Studies confirm Hallisey’s impression. Concerning Theravāda Buddhism, those compilations contain passages taken almost exclusively from the Pāli canon¹². Moreover, their editors seem to agree upon what the ‘significant’ topics were and, correspondingly, what text passages to select¹³. Roughly, the topics are: the early life of Siddhattha Gotama, his ascetic years, his awakening, and his death; the ‘sermon of Benares’, the Four Noble Truths and the Middle Way, the doctrines of dependent origination, *anattā*, the five *khandhas*, karma and rebirth, meditation and *nibbāna*, general ethical principles, and the basic rules of the *saṅgha*. These topics reflect the traditional classification of the ‘three jewels’ (*buddha*, *dhamma*, *saṅgha*); their selection is, certainly not by chance¹⁴, largely in accordance with the later commentarial tradition of the Theravāda school. The text passages selected for anthologies correspond to these topics. Although being not entirely identical, the compilations constitute a largely intersecting set of texts. The process of selecting topics and texts can be viewed as a form of canonization.

Taking the anthologies as a means (or an expression) of teaching Buddhism, we may state that the discipline of Buddhist Studies has created its own teaching canon — a secondary canon, as it were, extracted from the primary one. This secondary canon possesses the general features: it is authoritative, and it is, to a certain extent, fixed; the fact that the anthologies contain very similar text collections indicates that the academic community has ‘observed and protected’ the selection¹⁵.

¹² To a much lesser extent, they also contain sections from quasi-canonical works such as the *Milindapañha* or the *Visuddhimagga*.

¹³ Examples are: *Buddhism in Translations: Passages Selected from the Buddhist Sacred Books and Translated from the Original Pali into English*, by Henry Clarke Warren (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1915); *The Living Thoughts of Gotama the Buddha*, presented by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and I.B. Horner (London/Edinburgh: Morrison and Gibb, 1948); *Buddhism: A Religion of Infinite Compassion — Selections from Buddhist Literature*, ed. Clarence H. Hamilton (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1952); *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*, ed. E.A. Burt (New York: Mentor, 1955); *Buddhist Texts through the Ages*, ed. Edward Conze et al. (Oxford: Cassirer, 1954); *The Wisdom of Buddhism*, ed. Christmas Humphreys (New York: Random House, 1961).

¹⁴ Cf. above, note 9.

¹⁵ Below, I point to canonical texts that were omitted in this canonization process. While my example concerns the image of the Buddhist laity, another example would be

In recent times, the textual focus in teaching has shifted. One example of a new type of anthology is the voluminous collection *Buddhism in Practice*, edited by Donald Lopez, published in 1995¹⁶. All but one of the Theravāda texts in this volume are non-canonical, some even written by contemporary Buddhists¹⁷. Corresponding to the book's title, all texts concern in one way or the other Buddhist practice; they deal, for example, with the consecration ritual of Buddha images, with meditation, or donation. As an example of anthologies used in teaching, this compilation shows that the criterion for selecting texts is not their canonical status anymore but their significance for Buddhist practice.

A recent collection of essays on "Teaching Buddhism in the West" places strong emphasis on practice, as well¹⁸. In its first chapter, Frank Reynolds criticizes the usual 'Introduction to Buddhism' course. He describes it as "the kind of survey course that begins with (...) the historical life and teachings of Gautama Buddha, (...) moves through a rapid-fire treatment of some 2500 years of Buddhist intellectual and social history (...), and finally concludes with an equally rapid-fire survey of contemporary Buddhism in various countries around the world."¹⁹ As examples of an "alternative approach that will be appropriate and effective within a postmodern liberal arts curriculum," he suggests three types of courses on Buddhism, two of which are significant for our

the Vinaya passages that I.B. Horner refused to translate in her translation of the *Vinaya-piṭaka*. These passages, which deal with sexual issues, appear, in her words, "unsuitable for incorporation in a translation designed principally for Western readers," because of "the outspokenness and crudeness" they contain. *The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya-Piṭaka)*, transl. I.B. Horner, vol. 1 (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1992 [1938]), p. 197. Those passages have been translated recently; see Petra Kieffer-Pülz, "*Pārājika* 1 and *Saṅghādisesa* 1: Hitherto Untranslated Passages from the *Vinaya-piṭaka* of the Theravādins," *Traditional South Asian Medicine* 6 (2001), pp. 62-84.

¹⁶ *Buddhism in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995). Cf. also John S. Strong, *The Experience of Buddhism: Sources and Interpretations*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2002).

¹⁷ The only canonical text in the book, the *Gotamī-apadāna*, is little known and has been translated into a Western language here for the first time. *Buddhism in Practice...*, pp. 113-138.

¹⁸ *Teaching Buddhism in the West: From the Wheel to the Web*, ed. Victor Sōgen Hori, Richard P. Hayes, James Mark Shields (London/New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002).

¹⁹ Frank E. Reynolds, "Teaching Buddhism in the Postmodern University: Understanding, Critique, Evaluation," *Teaching Buddhism in the West...*, pp. 3-16, here: p. 8.

considerations²⁰. First, he proposes a concept for an introductory undergraduate course that deals not with the foundations of Buddhism and its historical development but with practices of contemporary Buddhists in Asia and North America. The goal of such a course is “to introduce students to a broadly representative variety of the real worlds of real Buddhists who are involved in real Buddhist practices that generate real Buddhist experiences.”²¹ Reynolds’ second concept of an advanced course comprises a canonical text, but focuses on the “ways in which the text has been received and put to use in the tradition.”²² It is obvious that in this article, Reynolds does not attach great importance to the Pāli canon for teaching purposes. His introductory course contains no canonical text whatsoever, and his advanced course focuses not on the content of the selected canonical text, but on its role in practice.

The approach underlying Reynolds’ concepts seems to represent a general trend. In the volume on *Teaching Buddhism in the West*, the authors suggest a number of teaching methods, all of which focus not on canonical texts but on other religious expressions, particularly on religious practice. For their class readings, they select either Buddhist texts that deal with — or are used in — practice, or scholarly articles describing contemporary forms of it²³. Canonical texts are of interest only as far as they have a role in practice.

²⁰ The third course deals with the establishment and development of Buddhism in the West and the development of Buddhist Studies. Reynolds, “Teaching Buddhism...,” pp. 9-11. Reynolds describes his vision of postmodern liberal education in detail in his article “Reconstructing Liberal Education: A Religious Studies Perspective,” *Beyond the Classics? Essays in Religious Studies and Liberal Education*, ed. Frank E. Reynolds, Sheryl L. Burkhalter (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), pp. 3-18.

²¹ Reynolds, “Teaching Buddhism...,” pp. 7-9, here: p. 9. One decade ago, Reynolds’ brief description of an introductory course had included contemporary practice as merely one among several elements. See his chapter on “Introducing Buddhism” in *Teaching the Introductory Course in Religious Studies: A Sourcebook*, ed. Mark Juergensmeyer (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), pp. 71-77.

²² The introduction of this course includes a “concise consideration of sub-topics” (!) such as textual criticism, the composition and compilation of the text, its canonical status, and its form and content. Reynolds, “Teaching Buddhism...,” p. 10.

²³ See particularly Todd T. Lewis’ article, “Representations of Buddhism in Undergraduate Teaching: The Centrality of Ritual and Story Narratives,” *Teaching Buddhism in the West...*, pp. 39-56.

This current trend covers up for another approach, the integration of practice into teaching. The volume *Teaching Buddhism in the West* also contains the article "Moving Beyond the 'ism': A Critique of the Objective Approach to Teaching Buddhism" by O'Hyun Park, Professor of Religion at Appalachian State University²⁴. Park criticizes what he calls objective studies of Buddhism, which "are conditioned by occidental or provincial patterns of thought and arbitrarily limited methodologies. It is typical of occidentals as well as of many contemporary Buddhists to wish to teach Buddhism by means of scientific understandings of Buddhist ideas. These objective studies of Buddhism fail to transmit the living essence of Buddhism, and in consequence, those whose approach is purely of this sort may conclude that Buddhism at its best is merely a form of psychology and has little to do with religious life."²⁵ Park suggests a different method of teaching Buddhism. The teacher, to begin with, must be a seeker him- or herself, and the student must be willing to find a spiritual companion. Then meditation must be included in teaching. Park states: "One must first *be still* in order to teach and learn Buddhism. In no other way can its essence truly be known or shown. Seen from this point of view, teaching and learning Buddhism, if it is not filtered by meditation, is not worthy of attention."²⁶ The goal of his method is "to introduce students to the Buddha's world and to help them be engaged in the process of moving in that direction themselves. In the process, the spirit of Buddhism may rub off on them. I personally do not know what in the process of teaching Buddhism has rubbed off on me, but I can only hope that whatever it is can be passed on to my students."²⁷

When using this way of teaching, Park gets mixed responses. He admits: "At times I am informed that my lectures suggest a dogmatic affirmation." His reaction to this critique reads: "This is only because I have temporarily been carried away by my deeper bias in the area. However, that this discussion of non-duality may lead students to re-examine their own

²⁴ O'Hyun Park, "Moving Beyond the 'ism': A Critique of the Objective Approach to Teaching Buddhism," *Teaching Buddhism in the West*..., pp. 57-68.

²⁵ Park, "Moving Beyond the 'ism'...", p. 67.

²⁶ Park, "Moving Beyond the 'ism'...", p. 59 (*italics in the original*).

²⁷ Park, "Moving Beyond the 'ism'...", p. 68.

approach to their lives and to enlarge their world is for me a sufficient justification for teaching it. A fair number of students have been very appreciative.”²⁸

Given this attitude, it is particularly interesting to learn about the texts Park uses for teaching. He writes: “For a text as a proverbial finger pointing to the moon, I have chosen my own translation of a sixteenth-century Buddhist text written by Xishan, a Korean Zen master. (...) Xishan made a substantial effort not only to grasp the essence of Buddhism, but also in most cases to make it relevant to the breadth of human existential awareness. In my judgement, this text warrants use as an alternative to most current texts that are based upon a widespread unawareness of the central thrust of Buddhist religiosity, a deficiency which may be related to long engrained patterns of dualistic thought.”²⁹ Park selects this text because in his view, it is suitable for grasping “the essence” of Buddhism. He rejects the canonical texts not because of their normativity and their distance from current Buddhist practice, nor because they fail to represent religious diversity, but because for him, they are less suitable for revealing Buddhism’s “central thrust.”

It is obvious that this is not an academic or historical, but a religious criterion. Park’s teaching method is thus a form not of academic education but of religious instruction. This example points to the important fact that many Western scholars of Buddhism are committed Buddhists themselves, so-called ‘scholar-practitioners.’³⁰ Although this is a well-known fact, there is still too little reflection about its implications for research and for teaching. In recent years, some scholars came up with ideas for a new sub-discipline of Buddhist Studies, called “Buddhist Theology.” This discipline, modeled after modern academic Christian Theology, would be a home for Buddhist scholars who stand normatively in their tradition and who, by using Western scholarly methods, critically reflect upon this

²⁸ Park, “Moving Beyond the ‘ism’...,” p. 62.

²⁹ Park, “Moving Beyond the ‘ism’...,” p. 63.

³⁰ Cf. Charles S. Prebish, “Buddhist Studies in the Academy: History and Analysis”, *Teaching Buddhism in the West...*, pp. 17-36, here: pp. 21-27; Cabezón, “Buddhist Studies as a Discipline...;” Gómez, “Unspoken Paradigms...;” Malcolm David Eckel, “The Ghost at the Table: On the Study of Buddhism and the Study of Religion,” *JAAR* 62 (1994), pp. 1085-1110.

tradition³¹. This interesting development can be a topic for research in itself, including the question whether it will be possible to retain the distinction between the “theological” reflections of this new discipline and the empirical approach of Buddhist Studies as part of the academic study of religion. Victor Hori supposes that we may encounter a separation into two disciplines, the “theological” and the academic study of Buddhism³². This would equal the separation of Christian theology and the academic study of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*). As the discussions are structurally similar (including well-known arguments, for example against alleged neutral scholarship), this new development may benefit from the long-lasting and ongoing debate between Christian theology and the study of religion³³.

O’Hyun Park’s approach, however, can hardly be considered an example of Buddhist Theology in the sense of critical, academic reflection. He uses postmodern and postorientalist arguments as a justification for propagating what he considers the “essence” of Buddhism, which is based upon his own translation of a sixteenth-century Zen text from Korea.

2. Reconsidering the Value of Canonical Texts

Given this trend of dissociating from the idea of a canon, what is the future perspective of Buddhist Studies? Should researchers abandon the

³¹ Cf. the essays in *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, ed. Roger R. Jackson, John J. Makransky (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), particularly the contributions by John Makransky, “Contemporary Academic Buddhist Theology: Its Emergence and Rationale,” pp. 14–21, and José Ignacio Cabezón, “Buddhist Theology in the Academy,” pp. 25–52.

³² Victor Sögen Hori, “Introduction,” *Teaching Buddhism in the West...*, pp. ix–xxv. Malcolm David Eckel views such a distinction critically; cf. his “The Ghost at the Table...”

³³ I am aware of the fact that differences between academic disciplines are discernable in normative and programmatic concepts rather than in actual practice. While the individual scholar could have more in common with one from another ‘discipline’ than with many of her or his own profession, it is programmatic concepts prescribing how scholars of a discipline *should* work that construct this discipline. Such concepts describe the boundaries of the subject matter, the theory, and the methods; within one discipline, they tend to be controversial and to compete with other concepts. Nevertheless, the continuous debate on a discipline’s identity is necessary for self-reflection; inter-, cross-, or transdisciplinarity is possible only if there are boundaries one can cross. Cf. my “Ist Wertung Theologie? Beobachtungen zur Unterscheidung von Religionswissenschaft und Theologie,” *Die Identität der Religionswissenschaft: Beiträge zum Verständnis einer unbekannten Disziplin*, ed. Gebhard Löhr (Frankfurt/M. et al.: Peter Lang, 2000), pp. 97–121.

primary canon of ancient, normative, and standardized texts, and focus on the local/present productions of meaning instead? Should instructors abandon the secondary canon, and focus on the contemporary practice or the ‘central thrust’ of Buddhism? Or is working with canonical texts and using a secondary canon for teaching still justifiable? I think it is. In the following sections of the paper, I intend to illustrate what I consider the significance of canonical texts for research and teaching. I start off by presenting one example: the image of the laity in early Buddhism.

According to the accounts given in ‘classical’ anthologies and in most textbooks, early Buddhist laymen and laywomen can be described as follows. Together with Buddhist monks and nuns (*bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs*), male and female laypeople (*upāsakas* and *upāsikās*) form the fourfold Buddhist community. They provide the former with clothes, food, lodging, and medicine, and they lead a moral life according to the *pañcasīlā*, that is, they refrain from harming living creatures, from stealing, from sexual misconduct, from false speech, and from consuming intoxicants. Unlike members of the *saṅgha*, lay people are *per se* incapable of higher spiritual accomplishment. Therefore, they do not strive for liberation from the cycle of rebirth and will not attain this state. Their (inferior) goal is rebirth in a heavenly world, and thus they do not engage in meditative practices but focus on morality and generosity. Particularly by donating gifts to the “unsurpassable field of merit,” that is the Buddhist *saṅgha*, they can accumulate merit that will cause a better rebirth.

As mentioned before, this roughly sketched image of the laity is prevalent in ‘classical’ textbooks and anthologies. Denying the fact that this image is common also in many sections of the Pāli canon would be absurd. But claiming that it is the only view traceable in the texts would be equally incorrect. When examining not only the ‘secondary canon’ preserved in modern anthologies but the entire doctrinal section of the Pāli canon, the *Suttapiṭaka*, one discovers a number of passages in which the authors create an image of laypeople that differs immensely from the one sketched above.³⁴ Here, the laity appears as a group not only serving the *saṅgha*

³⁴ For the following, see my *Der Orden in der Lehre: Zur religiösen Deutung des Saṅgha im frühen Buddhismus* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000), pp. 140-212; an English

but also observing and controlling the behavior of monks and nuns. Those accounts portray laypeople as self-confident persons who have the ability to assess the ethical and 'spiritual' status of the recipient of their gifts. They do not trust the promise that the best recipient is, by way of ordination, the Buddhist monk or nun; they reject the concept of the *saṅgha* as a field of merit that is, by definition, unsurpassable. Instead they individually select worthy recipients who lead a moral life and who are 'spiritually' advanced, because they believe that for gaining religious merit, the individual 'spiritual' status of the recipient weighs more than the person's status of being an ordained member of the *saṅgha*. How to accumulate merit is a serious issue for them, because it may cause rebirth in a heavenly world. In fact, a close look reveals that in the canonical texts, rebirth in heaven appears as a Buddhist soteriological goal independent from *nibbāna* (Skt. *nirvāṇa*). The two goals rarely appear in the same context; only a few theological passages link them and declare *nibbāna* the superior one. Reportedly, members of the *saṅgha* strive for rebirth in heaven, too³⁵. On the other hand, there are many accounts of laypersons receiving instructions into the most complex issues of Buddhist doctrine and attaining certain trance states. Some laypersons, the texts state, have even gained liberating insight and *nibbāna*.

Considering these accounts, we must put the clear division between members of the *saṅgha* and laypeople into perspective; members of both groups strive for — and attain — both goals, rebirth in heaven and *nibbāna*. The clear division of the groups appears as an idea belonging to an institutionalistic concept of the Buddhist *saṅgha*. A close view demonstrates that a different, rather individualistic, concept is just as common in the canonical texts. Due to the specific scope of earlier generations of

summary of major arguments in Oliver Freiberger, "Profiling the Sangha: Institutional and Non-Institutional Tendencies in Early Buddhist Teachings," *Marburg Journal of Religion* 5 (2000) (*online*: <http://www.uni-marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/mjr/freiberger.html>). Cf. also Jeffrey Samuels, "Views of Householders and Lay Disciples in the *Sutta Piṭaka*: A Reconsideration of the Lay/Monastic Opposition," *Religion* 29 (1999), pp. 231-241.

³⁵ Cf. for this issue Oliver Freiberger, "Salvation for the Laity? Soteriological Concepts in Early and Modern Theravāda Buddhism", *Studia Asiatica* 2 (2001), pp. 29-38; id., "'Ein Vinaya für Hausbewohner'? Norm und Praxis der Laienanhänger im frühen Buddhismus," forthcoming.

scholars, Buddhist textbooks — and scholarship at large — rarely take notice of this latter concept with regard to the laity.

For the considerations about the canon in Buddhist Studies, we can draw three major conclusions from this example. The first is that the Pāli canon is not homogeneous. A canon's general feature of being authoritative and normative does not presuppose homogeneity of its contents. On the contrary, it seems that oftentimes, heterogeneity of the canon contributes much to the success of a religion; the more views and practices can be legitimized by passages from the canon, the more worldviews are represented, and the more people can feel at home in that religious tradition. It becomes apparent that the secondary canon Buddhist scholars have created is not representative. Already in the early canonical Pāli texts, we discover a broad spectrum of attitudes, beliefs, and practices. Thus the reference to diversity in Buddhism, a point Frank Reynolds emphasizes when focusing on contemporary Buddhist contexts, can hardly be an argument for dismissing the canonical texts.

The second conclusion we can draw is that although canonical texts are generally normative, they do not only contain theoretical reflections of elite, ivory-tower theologians but also religious practice. Certainly, trying to entirely reconstruct social reality in Ancient India would be hopeless, but to a certain extent, detecting religious practices in normative texts is possible³⁶. Although far from what ethnographic fieldwork could achieve, such findings show that 'practice' appears frequently in the canonical texts. Therefore, the distinction between norm and practice does not necessarily correspond to the distinction between historical-philological method and socio-ethnographic method, let alone to the distinction between past and present. Actually, the often-felt rift between

³⁶ One issue of our example was the question whether the laypeople trust in the merit-promising institution of the *saṅgha* and thus act accordingly, or whether they select 'worthy' recipients and, furthermore, strive for their personal spiritual development and liberation. Examining the respective passages more closely, we could detect a number of concrete practices of Buddhist laypeople. For this issue, cf. Oliver Freiburger, "'Ein Vinaya für Hausbewohner'?" Jan Nattier develops methods for extracting historical data from a normative Buddhist source in her recent book, *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path according to The Inquiry of Ugra (Ugraparipṛcchā)* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), pp. 63-69; see also Christoph Kleine, "Der Kampf der Normen und die Suche nach dem Referenten," forthcoming.

the canon and practice seems to be due largely to our own one-dimensional construction of 'canonical Buddhism.'³⁷ Thus, a focus on practice in Buddhist Studies need not lead to the abandonment of canonical texts.

A third conclusion we can draw from the example is that although Western scholars have been examining the canon for more than a century, there is still a lot to discover. We must not believe that the great scholars of our field have said everything there is to say about the Pāli canon³⁸. Rather, with their 'protestant' view on Buddhism, some played down the rather 'catholic' practice of accumulating merit³⁹. Re-reading the same old texts can lead us to new and surprising insights, which broaden our horizons and, at the same time, highlight the specific scope of earlier generations of scholars⁴⁰.

The example shows that canonical texts are heterogeneous and diverse, that they contain both norms and practices, and that re-reading them helps us understand our own inherited presuppositions. With this conclusion, I do not intend to revive the outdated view that the Pāli canon is a source sufficient for all interests and questions of modern Buddhist Studies. But it is apparent that there is more to gain from the canon than some Buddhist scholars, who focus on contemporary practice, might expect⁴¹.

³⁷ Cf. Martin Southwold, *Buddhism in Life: The Anthropological Study of Religion and the Sinhalese Practice of Buddhism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), esp. pp. 202-212.

³⁸ Certainly, this point, just as other arguments in the present paper, refers not only to canonical texts but to historical sources in general; a discussion of the general value of the historical approach, however, would go beyond the scope of a paper that focuses on the canon.

³⁹ Cf. Gregory Schopen, "Archeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism," *History of Religions* 31 (1991), pp. 1-23; see also Oliver Freiberger, "Werke, Gute I: Religionsgeschichtlich," *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 35 (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2003), pp. 623-625.

⁴⁰ Gregory Schopen, who is otherwise well-known for challenging the traditional view of Buddhologists by referring to other sources, such as inscriptions and archaeological accounts, has also convincingly shown how we can come to new conclusions by reading the Pāli canonical texts with a fresh and critical question. Cf. Gregory Schopen, "Monks and the Relic Cult in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta*: An Old Misunderstanding in Regard to Monastic Buddhism", *From Beijing to Benares: Essays on Buddhism and Chinese Religion in Honour of Prof. Jan Yün-Hua*, ed. Koichi Shinohara and Gregory Schopen (Oakville: Mosaic Press, 1991), pp. 187-201.

⁴¹ Cf. also the considerations in Jonathan S. Walters, "Suttas as History: Four Approaches to the *Sermon on the Noble Quest* (Ariyapariyesanasutta)", *History of Religions* 38 (1998), pp. 247-284.

3. Implications for Research and Teaching

3.1. *The Fundamental Equality of Sources for Research*

The discussion about ‘Orientalism’ has helped Buddhist scholars develop a greater sensitivity of the fact that some ancestors in the field had certain presuppositions and motives that were determined by colonial interests, by the ‘protestant’ view on Buddhism, by their personal religious commitments and cultural biases, and so forth. Donald Lopez, Charles Hallisey, Luis Gómez, Gregory Schopen, Janice Leoshko, and others have provided substantial analyses of this issue⁴². Some scholars of earlier generations believed that the only appropriate way of examining Buddhism is to turn to its most ancient texts while neglecting later, alleged degenerate developments. Modern scholarship rightly opposes this implicit canonization. Presumably, most of today’s scholars would agree that there should be no restriction whatsoever as to what texts or religious expressions to select for research — so long as one is able to explain why the respective source lies within the scope of Buddhist Studies. If we thus agree that as a matter of principle, all sources have, as religious expressions, the same value for research, then a fixed secondary canon must not exist. What follows is that a canonical text, as one particular type of religious expression, has — on principle — no lesser value for research than contemporary ritual practice has. As a modern ritual handbook in a local context has its particular significance and meaning within a religious tradition, ancient canonical texts have theirs, too.

In the “alternative historical paradigm” Charles Hallisey envisages, Buddhist scholars are encouraged to “expect meaning to be produced in local circumstances *rather than* in the origins of the tradition” (my emphasis)⁴³. In her response, Jan Nattier rightly remarks that “meaning is also

⁴² Cf., for example, the volume *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), which includes Hallisey’s before-mentioned article, and the review essay by Jan Nattier, “Buddhist Studies in the Post-Colonial Age,” *JAAR* 65 (1997), pp. 469-485; Schopen, “Archeology and Protestant Presuppositions...,” Gómez, “Unspoken Paradigms...,” Janice Leoshko, *Sacred Traces: British Explorations of Buddhism in South Asia* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003); cf. also Eckel, “The Ghost at the Table...”

⁴³ Hallisey, “Roads Taken...,” pp. 50-53.

produced at the origins of the tradition (which, of course, had its own local circumstances), as well as at every other point along the historical continuum.”⁴⁴ Hallisey’s “alternative paradigm” is not identical with but corresponds to an attitude fairly popular in current studies of culture: the view that local, vernacular, non-canonical, sub-altern, and/or contemporary religious expressions are, as topics of research, of somewhat higher value than canonical texts. It is beyond doubt that these issues had been neglected in the past, and that studying them thoroughly is imperative. But there is a risk of falling into another trap: assuming that now the single appropriate way of examining Buddhism is the analysis of contemporary practice in local contexts. It seems crucial not to create a hierarchy in values that entails an exclusion of canonical texts from research. An implicit canonization of that kind would resemble the way earlier generations excluded non-canonical religious expressions⁴⁵.

Beside the fundamental insight that a scholarly canonization which excludes the Buddhist canon is methodologically unacceptable, it seems that the Buddhist canon remains, as I hope to have shown by the example of the early Buddhist laity, a rich source for the study of religion⁴⁶. Today, Buddhist Studies has not only expanded its scope in terms of topics for research, it also approaches its sources (including canonical texts) with questions different from those of the past. Such questions, and nothing else, should determine the criteria for selecting appropriate sources and methods⁴⁷.

3.2. *The Significance of Canonization for Teaching Buddhism*

Is this fundamental freedom to select sources equally applicable in the realm of teaching? To begin with, it seems helpful to view introductory

⁴⁴ Nattier, “Buddhist Studies in the Post-Colonial Age,” p. 472.

⁴⁵ Interestingly, the reservations about scholarly canonization appear to be much less pronounced when it comes to modern and contemporary texts. Cf. a recent collection of writings of modern Buddhists, the title and subtitle of which are telling: *A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings from East and West*, ed. Donald S. Lopez (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002). A “bible” is a canon *par excellence*, and preserving the “essence” is the most central objective of canonization.

⁴⁶ Besides, canon and exegesis are interesting topics also for comparative analysis; cf. Smith, “Sacred Persistence...”

⁴⁷ Cf. Nattier, “Buddhist Studies in the Post-Colonial Age,” pp. 483f.

and advanced courses separately. The advanced course deals with specific texts and contexts the instructor is familiar with; in these courses, students begin to specialize in certain areas of Buddhism. For the introductory course, I will consider two concepts: the new one suggested by Frank Reynolds, which deals exclusively with contemporary practice in Asia and North America; and the conventional survey course with its outline of Buddhist history.

The strongest point of Reynolds' concept is its significance for liberal education: undergraduate students, especially those who take only one course in Buddhism, will get an impression of Buddhism as it is practiced in the world they live in. I agree that integrating contemporary practice in the syllabus is of utmost importance. But narrowing the course contents down to current religious practice does not seem to be useful. Luis Gómez has convincingly argued that in Western education, the focus on practice in Buddhism is not accompanied by a parallel focus on practice in Western culture⁴⁸. He states that "an exaggerated inflation of the 'field' approach to Buddhism that excludes the textual tradition and the canons that guided that tradition may work in support of the exoticization of Buddhism, reinforce its alterity, and reinforce the perception among our students and the public at large that Buddhism is only a curiosity, and certainly not comparable to the well ordered and well-demonstrated products of our own culture."⁴⁹ He continues by saying that "the 'methodological' exclusion of the textual tradition leads to (...) the questionable assumption that textual traditions and textual elites are entities separate from the living traditions and the non-elite groups with which they obviously interact."⁵⁰

Moreover, the spread of Reynolds' concept would affect the conformity and comparability of undergraduate education in Buddhism. The texts he selects for his introductory course deal with specific practices at certain

⁴⁸ "The presentation of Buddhism in the classroom as something occurring only in a practice without canonical benchmarks may be more corrosive than one can perceive on first blush — after all, this degree of secularization and devaluation of the book is not accompanied by a parallel secularization and devaluation of the Great Books of our own culture." Gómez, "Unspoken Paradigms...", p. 205.

⁴⁹ Gómez, "Unspoken Paradigms...", p. 205.

⁵⁰ Gómez, "Unspoken Paradigms...", p. 206.

places; for example, image consecration and village rituals in Thailand, the ordination of novices in Korea, or healing rituals in Sri Lanka⁵¹. Obviously, Reynolds does not intend to ‘canonize’ these specific contexts of practice. In consequence, every instructor of Buddhism will make his or her own selection of contemporary contexts for their classes. Students of different universities will gain close insights into those respective contexts but will lack a common, basic knowledge of Buddhism. Over time, basic agreements will begin to crumble — a process that reinforces fragmentation and an *anything-goes* attitude that makes it increasingly difficult to assess and judge each other’s work.

One, already tangible, product of such an *anything-goes* attitude is O’Hyun Park’s approach. Blaming Western “occidental” scholars for their “dualistic” view, he uses post-orientalist arguments to justify his teaching method and the selection of texts that allegedly reveal the ‘essence’ of Buddhism best. Defining the ‘essence of Buddhism’ is, however, a religious act; in Buddhist history, Buddhists have done it in manifold ways. Due to this historical perspective, academic scholarship cannot determine the ‘essence’ of a religion. Thus, undisturbed by the academic community, Park gives religious instruction in the cloak of academic teaching, and his students may get the impression that Xishan’s sixteenth century Zen interpretation is all they should know about Buddhism. The fact that the editors accepted Park’s paper for a volume on *Teaching Buddhism in the West* shows that his approach is considered by some a legitimate option for teaching. Ironically, the current trend of abandoning the idea of a canon, of emphasizing religious practice, and of stressing the “variety of the real worlds of real Buddhists” (Reynolds), gives free rein to approaches that, for their part, reject diversity and reinforce particularism.

Therefore, using a secondary canon in teaching still makes sense. As it is unlikely that we might agree upon a binding selection of contemporary contexts, and considering the objections raised above, we may be inclined to return to our conventional, historical survey course⁵². It has

⁵¹ Reynolds refers to the (very useful) text collection *The Life of Buddhism*, ed. Frank E. Reynolds, Jason A. Carbine (Berkeley et al.: University of California Press, 2000).

⁵² It is reasonable to follow the historical developments in their proper historical course, but with caution. Gómez remarks correctly: “The challenge of the future, however, will be to find a way to retain the obvious pedagogical advantages of a chronological matrix

the advantage of providing students with a common basic knowledge of the beginnings and the historical development of Buddhism, and it also serves as a basis for further studies. This general survey seems to be crucial for liberal education, for otherwise students would face the complexity of Buddhism without any point of reference. But as Reynolds rightly complains, the conventional survey course too has serious weaknesses. With such a course, one could be tempted to neglect contemporary practice, to perpetuate a 19th century scholarly framework, and to cement a secondary canon of texts that has proved to be partial and biased. If we intend to maintain the general concept of the historical survey course, it needs to be modified.

Modifications should address what I call the horizontal and the vertical complexities of Buddhism. Making students aware of the *horizontal complexity* means to demonstrate, by way of example, that at every point in history, 'Buddhism' is a complex phenomenon. For instance, to illustrate the complexity of practices and beliefs of early Buddhist laypeople, an instructor could confront the 'classical' readings with other passages from the Pāli canon that undermine the alleged consistent image of the laity. Similarly, in other areas the secondary canon can be confronted with equally undermining data: with passages from non-canonical texts, with inscriptional records, with artistic accounts, and the like.

Demonstrating the *vertical complexity* means to make students aware of the complex nature of historical developments. To begin with, they must realize that the many forms of contemporary Buddhist practice represent merely a small portion of the multifarious ways in which Buddhism has taken shape throughout its history. Since the majority of those religious expressions is accessible through textual sources⁵³, discussing

while we replace the implicit universal linear narrative with a narrative that is neither culminationistic nor atomistic." Gómez, "Unspoken Paradigms..." p. 203.

⁵³ In Jan Nattier's words: "The intense and ongoing use of written sources thus will always be a central part of Buddhist Studies, stemming from the simple fact that most of the Buddhists who have ever lived are no longer with us today. If we wish to hear their voices, we must do so through the surviving texts — including, as Gregory Schopen has so eloquently argued, not just scriptural texts but also inscriptions, archaeological remains, and artistic data." Nattier, "Buddhist Studies in the Post-Colonial Age," p. 483. For a defense of the historical-philological method in Buddhist Studies, cf. also Tom J.F. Tillemans, "Remarks on Philology," *JIAS* 18 (1995), pp. 269-277.

the conditional nature of texts is crucial. Students must understand that canonical texts, for example, are not a given divine manifestation but a product of complex historical controversies, which also include power relations⁵⁴.

For demonstrating vertical complexity, it is also important to examine how history has shaped the present. By way of example, I again draw on the Buddhist laity. Modern Western Buddhism is largely a lay movement, but Western converts are not very interested in accumulating merit and rebirth in heaven; they prefer meditation and insight⁵⁵. This preference is determined by, among other factors, the scope of earlier generations of scholars and their particular way of presenting Buddhism to Western readers; had they focused on rebirth in heaven, or had they merely presented the two goals side by side, Buddhism would probably have gained less attention among seekers in the West⁵⁶. The observation that the canonical texts contain various soteriological goals thus reveals the biased perspective of our scholarly ancestors; and at the same time, it helps us understand how that biased perspective has again shaped contemporary Western Buddhism. On the other hand, realizing that even the ancient texts advocate the goal of rebirth in heaven may prevent students from subscribing to the arrogant view that the accumulation of merit, manifested in daily practices among contemporary Buddhists in Asia and among immigrant groups in the West, represented a degenerate and diluted version of Buddhism⁵⁷. If we integrate, which we should, a glance at contemporary practice in our modified survey course, being aware of the

⁵⁴ For this, general reflections upon the term 'canon' and comparisons with processes of canonization in other religions can be useful; cf. Smith, "Sacred Persistence..." Another aspect worth mentioning are the circumstances under which canonical texts have first been made accessible to the Western world and the ways early scholars dealt with them.

⁵⁵ Cf., for example, the interview with Jack Kornfield, a well-known American teacher of Theravāda meditation, in: Jack Kornfield, *Living Dharma: Teachings of Twelve Buddhist Masters* (Boston/London: Shambala, 1996), pp. 287-301. For other references, see my "The Meeting of Traditions: Inter-Buddhist and Inter-Religious Relations in the West," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 2 (2001), pp. 59-71 (online: <http://www.globalbuddhism.org>).

⁵⁶ This Western interest in Buddhism has, of course, its own historical background, namely a critical stance towards the Christian churches and their alleged authoritarian and dogmatic claims, and the longing for a rational and individualistic religion that does not require blind faith, an attitude connected with both Romanticism and Enlightenment.

⁵⁷ Cf. Southwold, *Buddhism in Life...*, pp. 202-212.

vertical complexity, of the complex historical circumstances that have shaped today's Buddhism, is imperative.

Conclusion

This paper has addressed four issues: the role of the Buddhist canon and the canonization taking place within Buddhist Studies, both for research and in teaching. Some scholars tend to discourage from studying the Buddhist canon and aim at eliminating its role in teaching. I hope to have shown that studying the Buddhist canon remains worthwhile in itself and even more, helps understand better our own presuppositions in the field. In addition, I have argued that although integrating contemporary practice in the introductory course is necessary, the historical survey course, which includes readings from the canonical texts, remains the best option for providing a basis for further studies as well as for liberal education in general.

Earlier generations of scholars were interested in the origins of Buddhism and thus focused on the earliest, that is the canonical, texts. Moreover, in textbooks and anthologies they presented only a certain selection of text passages and religious concepts, while excluding others. They selected texts according to their interests which were determined by their own culturally and personally, often 'protestant' backgrounds. In such a way, they again 'canonized' the sources which for them represented original or authentic Buddhism. For overcoming this — still influential — canonization, Buddhist scholars have turned to other expressions of Buddhist religiosity, particularly to contemporary religious practice. I have argued that following this trend, Buddhist Studies runs the risk to further a new process of canonization which now excludes the Buddhist canon. The fact that the issues argued for (diversity and practice) are present in canonical texts too, is largely ignored, in part due to the inherited ('canonized') image of the canon.

The exclusion of the Buddhist canon is notably conspicuous in recent discussions about teaching. The old, canonized sources for teaching (anthologies and textbooks) that comprise Buddhist Studies' secondary canon are abandoned, in favor of accounts of contemporary religious practice. This trend of rejecting canonization for teaching entails an

anything-goes attitude which encourages the abandonment of common standards and allows particularistic religious instruction into the classroom. I have argued that in contrast to research, undergraduate education, particularly on the introductory level, needs a secondary canon. A common basis of knowledge gives students some certainty in orientation, a first frame of reference (which they may criticize and deconstruct at a later point), and the capability of communicating with, and assessing the work of other students and scholars in Buddhist Studies. But in addition to that, I suggest that during the course, every now and then the 'classical' readings should be supplemented and confronted with other, undermining data. Thereby demonstrating the diversity and the historically conditioned nature of the sources, an introductory course can make students aware of the horizontal and the vertical complexity of Buddhism without withholding from them a common basis of knowledge.