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My Life in Buddhist Studies

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First, I'd like to thank Chuck Prebish for the opportunity to contribute to this interesting and valuable project. Second, I am sure that my version of this story is considerably less engaging than those of my peers—especially those who came of age in the generation before mine; i.e., in the 1960s and 1970s. With that caveat (always good to lower expectations!), let's begin.

Family Connections

It was in the early 1980s that, as a late adolescent, my curiosity was first piqued by Asian cultures and civilizations. The primary causal force was very close to home: my mother. For it was at this time, roughly the age of 12, that it began to dawn on me that my mother—a seemingly ordinary middle-aged and middle-class Canadian woman—was in fact the product of a somewhat more exotic, even tragic, upbringing. Born in Manila, the Philippines in 1937, of Scots, Spanish, and a tiny sliver of native Filipino heritage, she found herself at the tender age of 4 rounded up by an invading Japanese military force and placed in an internment camp on the grounds of Santo Tomas University in Manila, where she and her family were forced to reside for the next 3 years. Needless to say, these were difficult times, and though my mother's memories are vague, she does recall a clear distinction between the 'nice' and 'nasty' Japanese guards, as well as the decreasing supplies of food as the war wore on and Japan went from aggressor to defender of the islands. Many years later, reading Brian Victoria's *Zen at War* allowed me to reconcile, to some degree, my surprise about how Japanese soldiers, most of who were nominally 'Buddhist', could engage in military aggression against their Asian neighbors (many of whom fellow Buddhists). Liberated in 1945 by General McArthur himself, her parents dying soon afterwards — no doubt due to weakness incurred during the internment — my mother eventually made her way to Canada, where she met and married my father (an ordinary, middle class Canadian man of Irish, Quaker and Loyalist heritage).

By the time of my childhood, of course, this Japanese-inspired (and Buddhist-inflected?) trauma was a dim historical memory, hardly resonant with my much more fortunate childhood in small city New Brunswick, Canada. And yet, once I became fully aware of this past, I became interested in Japan—both the aggressive and closed imperialist regime of the 1930s and 40s, and the pacifist, economically booming and culturally fascinating country of the 1980s. I was hooked...but not quite. In fact, it was only a dozen years later that, at the age of 24 and having completed a B.A. in anthropology and political science (McGill) and an M.Phil. in social and political theory (Cambridge) that I once again found my attention turned towards East Asia.

Montréal—Cambridge—Montréal

My undergraduate experience was formative, but less because of the courses and teachers at McGill than due to the fact that I was for four years of early adulthood happily resident in one of the most fabulous cities on the planet, Montréal, Quebec. Although I paid surprisingly little heed as to what I would eventually *do* in life, I was however entranced by the possibilities of studying subjects that were literally unheard in my high school curriculum: philosophy, political science, anthropology, and so on. The very first class I took at McGill, simply called *Political Theory I*, was taught by Charles Taylor, already a major name in philosophy for his penetrating work on Hegel, and at work on what would become, to my mind, his magnum opus: the ridiculously wide-ranging *Sources of the Self*. I was fortunate to take part in a graduate-level seminar with Taylor, for which I wrote a paper called *William Wordsworth and the Crisis of the 'Belle Âme': Romantic Solipsism and Communicability in Expressive Poetics*, in which I argued that in the poetics of Wordsworth, language “gains its autonomy, and frees itself from the subjective-intersubjective axis.” Though I had initially intended to major in anthropology (particularly, human evolution), my interests turned increasingly towards philosophy and social and political theory. By the time of my senior undergraduate thesis—*‘There is No Wealth but Life’: Aesthetics and Biotics in Left Cultural Politics*—I was leaning towards further study, thus taking some steps towards fulfilling my family childhood nickname of ‘the Professor’ (granted at age 6 when I insisted that my father read me the entire *World Book Encyclopedia*, beginning with ‘A’...). Upon graduation from McGill, after a summer planting trees in northern British Columbia, with many an hour spent in the close company of sundry black bears and disturbingly large moose, I applied to and was accepted into the Masters of Philosophy program in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Cambridge.

After several months backpacking around west and central Europe, I arrived on the banks of the Cam in early Fall 1992. My advisor was Prof. Anthony Giddens, the well-known sociologist who has written many books dealing with modernity, and who would soon go on to become a principal architect of Tony Blair's "third way" vision of liberal/social democracy. 'Tony'—as he insisted we call him—was miles away from the stereotyped Cambridge don, though I suspect he played up his casualness the more 'famous' he became. I enjoyed my 14 months under his tutelage, though I confess I spent more time reading literature and philosophy and basking in the aesthetic and natural pleasures of Cambridge and surrounding countryside as I did seriously engaged in graduate-level research. That said, by the end of my short sojourn in the UK I had managed to produce three reasonably interesting papers—one of which, on the French theorist Foucault, introduced some elements of Zen thought—capped off with a thesis, entitled *Styles of Transcendancy: Fundamentalism and Fideism—Towards a Genealogy of Faith in the Modern World* (I had not yet learned that one subtitle is enough!).

January, 1994: I was now back in Montréal, Canada after a year abroad in the United Kingdom, and had entered the Master's program in the Faculty of Religion Studies at McGill University. Here I was delighted to come under the tutelage of a number of inspiring teachers and scholars, including Ed Furcha and Gregory Baum on the history of Christianity and ethics, Maurice Boutin on philosophy of religion, and Arvind Sharma and Victor Sogen Hori on Hinduism and Buddhism, respectively. But the one person who decidedly changed my interests was a man who would soon publish a book subtitled *Reflections of a Sceptical Buddhist*, Richard P. Hayes. At the time, I had some vague intentions of completing a PhD in Western philosophy of religion, but a single course with Hayes, in which we read Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakārikā* (Jay Garfield's wonderful annotated edition) opened my eyes to the possibilities of Buddhism as not only a course of study but a way of being in the world. At around the same time, via Dr. Hori, I was introduced to the Kyoto School, and soon found myself thumbing through the works (in translation) of Nishida Kitarō, Nishitani Keiji and Tanabe Hajime.

Of course, like any typical young, educated white male of the postwar period, I had some years earlier come into contact with the Westernizing works of D. T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, and Hesse's *Siddhartha*, but never felt entirely comfortable with what Watts would himself famously skewer as "Beat Zen" (though I now teach a course under that name at Bucknell). There was something different going on in books like

Nishida's *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishitani's *Religion and Nothingness*, and Tanabe's *Philosophy as Metanoetics*. They seemed both familiar—my studies in Western philosophy and religion certainly helped here—and delightfully obscure. I soon realized I needed to find out more, even if it meant travelling to Japan to study.

So it was that one fateful day in late 1999, as I prepared to teach my popular course (750 students!) on *Sexual Ethics* at McGill, I came across, in the back pages of the *Economist*, of all places, a call for applications by the Japanese Ministry of Education and Culture (Monbusho) for a multi-year ministry-funded scholarship to undertake graduate level studies at a university in Japan. A quick word with Hayes and Hori convinced me to apply, and I was ecstatic to be chosen as one of just two Canadians to join the program in October 2000. I had at this point completed all my requirements for the PhD, with the exception of the thesis — and was still at a loss for a topic, though I knew now that it would have to involve both Buddhism and Japan, in addition to Western thought. Then I came across the edited volume *Pruning the Bodhi Tree: The Storm over Critical Buddhism*, edited by Jamie Hubbard and Paul Swanson, and knew I had found my topic. Critical Buddhism (*Hihan bukkyō*) was the perfect storm, as it were, combining Japan, Buddhist, ethics, politics and comparative philosophy. Finally, at the age of 31, after some years of hesitation, I was jumping into the “stream” of global Buddhist Studies headfirst.

Kyoto

October 3, 2000: I arrive in Kyoto, unsure what to expect, and even whether I had made a smart choice in accepting the fellowship. Sure, it was 18 months guaranteed housing, food and income, at a level I had never had previous, and ‘all’ I had to do was study Japanese language and Buddhism, intensively... but I was, I fully realized, delaying the completion of my PhD for at least another 4-5 years. However, after my second afternoon in Kyoto — temples and shrines at every turn, the autumnal air beside the Kamogawa river resonant with the unforgettable scent of tea olive (*osmanthus fragrans*) trees, my vista from the Sanjo Ohashi bridge transfixed by looming peaks on three sides, all of historical religious significance: Mount Hiei to the east, Kurama to the north, and (my favorite) Mount Atago to the west — I was hooked. And indeed, I would spend the next 5 years and 2 months living in Japan: 20 months in Kyoto and another 30 in Tokyo. During that time, I would achieve fluency — and more crucially, reading competency — in Japanese, study the Zen, Pure Land, and Nichiren traditions, complete my dissertation for McGill on Critical Buddhism *and* get married to a woman from Osaka. Not bad for 5 years work!

In Fall 2002, I had the great pleasure to participate in the Antioch Buddhist Studies Abroad Program as Instructor of Buddhist History and Philosophy. This program, which brought several dozen students to Kyoto to spend a semester travelling around Western Japan, studying Japanese language and Buddhism while living (mostly) in temples and participating in meditation, rituals, pilgrimage and so on, was eye-opening for me as much as for the students. High points included the *goma* ceremony on Mount Kōya and running through bamboo forests as part of the 88-temple Shikoku pilgrimage. At least four students in the program would go on to do post-graduate work in Japanese religions. And I would be remiss not to note the leader of the Kyoto-Antioch Program at that time: Dr. Pat Masters. Pat was wonderful as a mentor to myself as well as the students; her unflagging energy and kindness kept everything together.

Tokyo

Wanting very much to stay in Japan, as the end of my Monbusho fellowship drew to a close in 2002 I applied for and was appointed to a position teaching humanities and world religions at Lakeland College, a Japan-based branch of a small school in Sheboygan, Wisconsin located in East Shinjuku, near the heart of the heart of Tokyo. I ended up spending exactly 3 years in this position. In retrospect, it is amazing that I was somehow able to complete my dissertation while teaching a 5-5 load! With classes running between 90 minutes and 2 hours, some of my days were spent teaching from 8-5, with barely an hour respite for lunch. I taught a number of very broad courses, including *Humanities I and II*, *World Religions*, *Western Religions*, *Eastern Religions*, *Art History* and *Sociology*. So Buddhism made up probably no more than 2% of my total class time. It was eye-opening, and a little disconcerting, to see that my students — near all of whom were Japanese intending to go on to study in the United States, Canada, Australia, or the United Kingdom, were significantly more conversant with Western culture and history than with Asian traditions, including, and perhaps especially, the religious traditions of Japan. Michelangelo they knew; Plato, sure; Dante, perhaps - but Dōgen, not so much... It was also an unforgettable experience to travel from my place in Mejiro to Shinjuku every morning —squeezing (or being forcibly squeezed!) into the Yamanote Line train for 3 stops before being expelled into Shinjuku station, through which, I am told, the equivalent of the population of Boston passes each day.

Tokyo was not and could never match Kyoto. Temples and shrines were hard to find, whereas in the old capital they are hard to miss. And yet, my stay in Tokyo helped immensely with my Japanese language and also my understanding of contemporary,

urban Japan, in all its glories and wackiness. Perhaps my favorite thing about metro Tokyo is the fact that it is effectively made up of a series of interlocking yet culturally and stylistically distinct ‘cities’, many of which can be identified with particular stops on the JR Yamanote Line that circles the metropolis: Ikebukuro, Shinjuku, Shibuya, Ginza, Akihabara, Asakusa, Ueno...

Bucknell

In December 2005, having by this time completed and submitted my dissertation to McGill, I accepted an opportunity to teach East Asian Religions — primarily, Buddhism — at Bucknell University, a large-ish liberal arts college (or small-ish university, we’re never quite sure) located in central Pennsylvania. Of course, this meant leaving Japan and returning to a place not unlike the one in which I grew up (albeit south of the border, and thus with much milder winters!). Remarkably, I’ve now been at Bucknell for a dozen years, during which my line was shifted from Religious Studies to an innovative interdisciplinary program called Comparative Humanities. As Professor of Comparative Humanities and Asian Thought, I have great flexibility and freedom in designing my courses, about half of most of which are connected to Buddhism of East Asian philosophy (others are thematic, such as *Utopia: Past, Present, Future Perfect* and *Modernism and Crisis*). I have also recently been appointed as Inaugural Director of Bucknell’s new Humanities Center, a bold investment in liberal education that clearly cuts against the prevailing cultural and political winds.

I am, first and foremost, a scholar of Asian and comparative philosophy of religion, with a particular focus on the transformation of religious ethics during periods of modernization and globalization. Since arriving at Bucknell, I have had 28 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters published or accepted for publication, in addition to 20 reviews, encyclopedia articles, and translations. In 2011, I published my first authored book: *Critical Buddhism: Engaging with Modern Japanese Buddhist Thought*, with Ashgate Press. The book was reviewed favorably in a number of leading journals in Buddhist and Asian Studies, as well as the *Times Literary Supplement*. My second monograph, *Against Harmony: Progressive and Radical Buddhism in modern Japan*, was published by Oxford University Press in April 2017. In addition, I have published two co-edited volumes (*Buddhist Responses to Globalization* and *Radical and Revolutionary Buddhisms in Thought and Practice*) since receiving tenure in 2013, with another edited project, *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics*, on pace for publication in late 2017.

Critical Buddhism

My first book, published in 2011 as the product of a decade of research, dealt with a recent movement in Japanese Buddhist studies called “Critical Buddhism” (*hihan bukkyō*). Broadly, this was an attempt by two hitherto conventional Buddhist Studies scholars—Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shirō—to investigate East Asian Buddhist tradition by incorporating a *critical* perspective borrowed in part from Western thought, including René Descartes (who despite writing a book called *Meditations*, makes a very unlikely Buddhist). I was intrigued by their primary argument: that Buddhism is (or should be) rooted in the sort of radical self-reflection that ultimately manifests in a humanistic, rationalistic ethics/politics of a liberal, progressive sort. And also by their method, which was both explicitly comparative and explicitly normative. The Critical Buddhists were not content to make “objective” claims about Buddhist tradition, but were committed rather to *changing the way people think about (and thereby practice) Buddhism*. In this sense, they may be called Buddhist “theologians”—though of a decidedly non-sectarian and non-traditional sort. Their work was, I argued, “counter-discursive”—in the sense that they were providing a radical, provocative, re-reading of East Asian Buddhist thought for the purpose of stimulating new forms of *praxis*. And they were using Western philosophy to bolster their case.

Against Harmony

After publishing this book, I became interested in finding a pedigree, as it were, for Critical Buddhism. I quickly discovered that Japan had a century earlier experienced a wave of critical (sometimes radical) philosophy that had roots in Buddhism as well as Western thought; i.e., that was both critical and comparative—where the comparative component was part and parcel of the critical imperative. My second monograph, *Against Harmony*, explores the genealogy of comparative, critical Buddhist thought as it developed from the mid-Meiji period (i.e., roughly the late 1880s) through the early Showa period (i.e., mid-1930s), when historical events coalesced to eliminate all such experiments. Perhaps the two best representations were the New Buddhist Fellowship (1899-1915) and the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism (1931-1936). Both of these were non-sectarian, lay movements involving mostly young men with education in classical Buddhist texts as well as Western philosophy and religion. Their work effectively collapses commonly held distinctions between religion, philosophy, ethics, politics, and economics. Unlike many others of their day, they *did not* regard the “novel forces of modernization” as “problematic and disruptive”—but rather as an “opportunity.” Moreover, these “new Buddhists” experimented with novel, alternative forms of

modernity. That is, they did not simply inherit or “mimic” the dominant Western model(s).

Current and Future Work

For the past year, while finalizing the draft of *Against Harmony*, I have been engaged in a third project, extending from both of the first two. Tentatively entitled *Radical Enlightenment: Buddhist Awakening and Progressive Thought*, this monograph will take both the critical and methodological insights of 1990s Critical Buddhism and the doctrinal and philosophical experiments of the Japanese New Buddhists of the early twentieth century to develop a new, provocative theory of Buddhist “enlightenment.” My principal thesis is that while traditional understandings of “enlightenment” (Skt. *nirvana*, Pali *nibbana*, Jp. *nehan*, *satori*, *kenshō*) emphasize the individual aspect over the communal and largely disavow “politics” and “economics” as appropriate spheres of activity for serious Buddhist practitioners (especially monastics), Buddhist tradition has in fact a minority tradition of thought that complicates the dualistic implications of this understanding. One way to highlight this “other Buddhism” is to employ the tools of analysis of comparative philosophy, in particular the tradition of progressive and radical thought that, in the West as well, has functioned as a comparatively minor but nonetheless deeply influential counter-discourse, extending from Epicurus and Lucretius through Giordano Bruno, Spinoza, Marx and the classical anarchist thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is *not* to suggest that this “other” Buddhism perfectly parallels Western materialist and progressive/radical thought, but rather that the critical analysis provided by thinkers such as Epicurus and Spinoza provide fresh insights into Buddhism—particular, I argue, Buddhism in the context of modernity.

The “Buddhistic” aspects of Epicurus’s writings are truly striking: the naturalism, humanism, acceptance of change, critique of common delusions (such as a belief in gods, salvation, immortality), commitment to simple pleasures, and emphasis on mental equilibrium (as well as physical health) as the key to human flourishing. Though often labelled an atheist, Epicurus is perhaps more properly categorized as a “pantheist”—in ways similar to his most influential philosophical heir, Spinoza. It is worth noting that the New Buddhists saw “pantheism” (*hanshinron*) as the “essence” of Buddhism; i.e., the cosmological worldview that best supported their progressive interpretation of Buddhist doctrine.

I am sympathetic to Matthew Stewart’s conception of the “radical” perspective that

anchors the Epicurean tradition and finds full expression in the work of Spinoza. Here, “radical” means more than simply the desire for change in the fundamental order of society (and/or consciousness), but in the sense of a direct and penetrating critique of “common sense.” Our everyday ideas and assumptions arise at least in part from our common, shared experiences, but while the “common consciousness is useful in a limited way for the purpose of making it through the everyday struggles of our lives”—that is, it has evolutionary resonance— “radical philosophers have maintained that there is something deeply flawed in these common ideas about things, something that induces us to betray ourselves and even participate in our own enslavement when those ideas are applied on any scale larger than that of daily life” (Matthew Stewart, *Nature’s God* [Norton, 2014], 6). This seems, to me, an apt description of certain forms of Buddhism, in particular those developed in the context of East Asian modernity.

Final Thoughts on Buddhist Studies

Let me close with a few reflections about Buddhist Studies as I envision it, and as it relates to my own life experience and personal goals. I have now published two monographs, in addition to three edited volumes and several dozen articles, book chapters and translations. Most of this work deals with several intersecting themes: Japanese Buddhism, modernity, ethics, and political theory. Since embarking on my study of Critical Buddhism, I have been fascinated with the various forms that Buddhism has and may take in response to the incursions of modern life — especially large-scale, disruptive processes such as globalization, colonialism, and capitalism. I believe Buddhism is deeply *political*, and that is not only inevitable, but a good thing. As such, the study of Buddhism is and must be political, though again, in the broad sense of engaging directly with issues of local, regional and global suffering. In fact, I confess that I have a hard time distinguishing Buddhism as a practice from Buddhist Studies, to the horror, I’m sure, of many of my colleagues! I’ve always felt that my own ‘practice’ is to engage in critical examination of particular forms and manifestations of Buddhism, with the hopes of creating other — perhaps more ‘effective’ — tools with which to enhance conviviality (to paraphrase Ivan Illich). My latest monograph, *Against Harmony: Progressive and Radical Buddhism in Modern Japan*, takes some steps towards developing a ‘critically constructive’ frame for living Buddhism in the context of the 21st century—a task I very much hope to continue in my next project and all future work.