Teaching Buddhism Through Art: Fourteenth-Century Tibet and Canada Today

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I am currently serving as the Acting Director for the Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation for Buddhist Studies at the University of Toronto, but this is a new role and one quite different than what has kept me busy for most of the past few years. For the past three years, since finishing my doctorate, I have mostly been teaching Buddhist Studies courses in a History of Religions setting at my Canadian University, the University of Toronto. One of the many challenges of this task has been to gather together students of diverse backgrounds and experiences, most of whom know absolutely nothing about Buddhism and its history, and usually a few who might have some personal connection to the dharma through their families or communities, and to try to create a significant learning experience for all of them that opens up, hopefully, a greater interest in learning about Buddhism, its philosophy and history. In this moment in pedagogy at our University, we are also being asked to expand our University teaching practices to elicit more "experiential learning." Experiential learning "aims to enrich the undergraduate education experience by promoting and nurturing unique opportunities and approaches to learning both within and outside of the classroom" and is often described as "learning by doing."[1] This means harnessing student's own experiences in the learning process, making them learn through and by doing, and not just simply lecturing at them (which, sadly, we have mostly all gotten very used to and good at!).

In meeting these goals, I am finding that teaching in and through Buddhist art has been one excellent way of moving in this direction, of capturing the interest of students, of encouraging them to think differently about religion, and to understand it as a lived tradition, both historical and current. In the classroom I have been bringing in and using Buddhist objects, sculptures, paintings, and

1 https://www.utm.utoronto.ca/experience/experiential-education-unit

small ritual objects, placing these into the hands of my students, as a way to elicit genuine student interest, questions and responses, and to structure the learning of the group. Indeed, as I reflect here today, I think it is not so new and not so different from what Buddhist temples and monasteries also did as teaching and learning strategies for a long time, even though the goals of the teaching may be slightly different. There could of course be many different kinds of experiential learning in Buddhism, and if my courses were in a different kind of department than a Historical Studies/History of Religions program one could imagine all sorts of other ways to learn by doing about Buddhism and its practices - courses that train students in meditation for example would also be meeting this goal. In my courses, where we are supposed to be teaching history, culture, context, how can experience be brought to the task? A useful approach I have found has been bringing physical, material, beautiful objects, and putting them into the hands of students during both single and group work in the classroom, as well as expanding the classroom to venues like the museum and building assignments around Buddhist objects in museum settings.

Yet I suspect from my research too that Buddhist arts have always, and even in other much more distant (temporal and geographic) contexts, been useful in teaching and training students and practitioners. Arts can draw people in, ask them to integrate the visual and material into their own experience, serve as gateways to the philosophical and the immaterial. Art invites them to form their own questions, to actively choose to know more. Art also created and elicits real experiences for people, and these experiences can be transformative. Art presents stories and symbols, inviting people to want to understand these stories and symbols, not only rationally and intellectually, but in physical and emotional ways as well.

I am speaking here from the perspective of my research in Tibetan Buddhist art history, the field of research that informed

my doctoral research and which I am now channeling into a book project. I have been looking specifically at mural paintings produced in the early to middle of the fourteenth century, that is the 1300's to 1350's, in a temple in Southern central Tibet called Shalu (Zhalu, Zhwalu, Xialu). This temple, which I have visited and photographed three times, was made as a rich visual space that is overwhelming and gloriously colourful, and I imagine must have been even more so to viewers in the fourteenth century when the temple was first built and painted. The Buddhist temple of Shalu was highly decorative—and was painted in exhausting detail with visual images and long Tibetan. There would also have been over-life size sculpture in many of the shrine rooms, but the fourteenth century sculptures were all destroyed in the last century and so are not available for study. However, miraculously, many of the paintings remain largely intact, and so provide an excellent opportunity to think about how art was used and useful as a form of teaching and communication in the medieval period. As one of the most well patronized, "public" forums for the dissemination of Buddhism (I call the walls a "public art form" since, unlike Buddhist manuscripts, the walls and their paintings would have been visible to anyone who visited the temple), the walls of the temple were an important place for the Buddhist institution to communicate with its audiences, which included both resident monks at the temple and the wider audience of lay sangha members who were invited to come to the temple and patronize it.

The walls are painted with images and with visible words combined together, but only a small part of this audience would have been literate enough in the fourteenth century to read the Buddhist texts on the wall, and indeed, probably nearly all of the non-monastic community, both lay men and women, were not able to read at all. Hence the mural art provided an important educational function of exposing these audiences, and inviting these audiences, to participate in Buddhist history and teachings,

inviting them to know more about both of these.

Now certainly, the walls of Shalu, like any Buddhist temple space, can be explained in other functional and religious terms as well, if we feel tempted to do so. Just producing them would have been considered merit-making acts of devotion. Additionally, this temple had received patronage from the Yuan court in China, the court of the Mongols who were major patrons of Tibetan Buddhism, and so can be considered as a kind of political statement of proximity and friendship (expressed through the exchange of funds and craftsmen) to a very important foreign court. The art itself is a unique record of this time—and shows the evidence of contact in the style of its artistic forms—Nepalese visual elements are combined alongside notably Chinese pictorial elements—proof that craftsmen and artists from all over Asia, including some architectural engineers from China, and painters from the Kathmandu valley, along with a group of local Tibetan craftsmen, worked alongside one another in the production of the temple's arts. These things are all probably true, but these points do not diminish the additional truth that the temple art was made as a forum to communicate with its audiences, and did so through rich, symbolic, visual images made to educate, explicate and share Buddhism.

So what kinds of mural images were added at Shalu in the fourteenth century? I will show now a few specific examples to illustrate some of the different ways that the fourteenth-century mural art was produced as communication and education for the temple's various audiences.

At Shalu, different paintings were added in different kinds of spaces, and these spaces invited different audiences to participate in them in different ways. There is a contrast here between the kinds of murals that appear in the ground floor of the temple, and the upper story rooms of the temple. It is indeed possible and likely that while the ground floor spaces, the shrines and the very large and enclosed circumambulatory passage, were spaces that any

and all temple visitors were invited into, meaning that both monks and lay people saw them often, the upper shrines were restricted to monks alone. While there is little written documentation about the ways that the temple spaces were used and/or if access to some parts of them were restricted, this seems probable and likely. At the level of teaching and communication then, how are the paintings on the ground floor and the upper level different?

On the ground floor, the paintings invite a viewer to audience with the Buddhas, both peaceful and wrathful, and further, explode a book onto the walls so as to explain visually for an illiterate audience what books are and do.

I will explain these two visual methods here: the two shrine rooms at the sides of the assembly hall are painted with extremely beautiful, colourful, resplendent and detailed images of the five Jina or victor Buddhas. These are not the historical Buddha, but instead visual representations of the Buddha mind as explained in five parts, five elements, five colours and five teachings, an essential and important Tantric explanation of the mind of enlightenment. The paintings are large and stunning, and go above the area where an altar would have been. The details of the images invite the eye to linger: the soft curling strands of hair flowing onto the shoulders of the Buddhas, the tendrils of decorative Makara tails that elaborate the edges of the Buddhas thrones, the gems and jewels that cover their beautiful colourful bodies, all invite a viewer to pause and appreciate, following the elaborate detail of their fluid lines. All of these visual elaborations invite the human eye to experience wonder at their beauty. The understanding through symbols of what this potential for enlightenment must be like is not only rational, but physical and material. These Buddhas invite you into their audience—you are dwarfed by them, amazed by them, and imaginatively and physically in their presence in this room. For standing in this room, under the tranquil gaze of five great Buddhas, a viewer is placed in their palace, participant

in offering in their immediate physical space. Through sheer proximity and the power of their scale and beauty, in their presence you are their devotee.

In this same room, another set of paintings on the back wall, show deities of a different sort, here in particular two versions of Achala, a meditational deity in wrathful appearance, flank the doorway. But they have also been planned and designed to invite their viewers into imaginative interaction with them: they wield their swords and look down directly at the entryway through which people enter the room. When you look back at them, you see that they watched you enter, and they will again watch you leave. Their animated swords are held taut above you, and could strike you. You, the viewer, are meant to experience connection with this emotion—is it a thrill of fear? The paintings play with the real physical space of the room, they burst into your room, and are not bounded merely by the limits of the wall. The paintings have put you into contact with them. The art of the shrine room here then enlivens the viewer to experience proximity and emotional contact with the Buddhist realm of enlightenment that you are brought into physically.

The other visual strategy of the first floor paintings is the physical and visual opening of a great illustrated book along and across a huge enclosed passageway. The great circumambulatory is an interior, enclosed, long and dark passage that has been completely painted with visual images and inscribed texts. The outer wall of this passage is painted with *Jataka* stories, stories of the Buddhas previous lives as all sorts of generous and wonderful bodhisattvas before he was born in the life of Siddhartha Gautama, and all of these stories are taken from one specific fourteenth century textual collection made by the Tibetan teacher, the third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje. A circumambulatory passage is made for just that—the devotional act of circumambulating devotional objects and places by walking around them in a circular fashion.

Here this means walking around the central shrines of the temple. This was not a space to stop and read or even analyze in detail the complex images, and it is unlikely that many viewers did that. The paintings and inscriptions are quite high on the walls, and the passage is narrow and dark, meaning that many of them are in fact very hard to see with the naked eye in any real detail, and certainly to read the long inscriptions would have been very difficult for viewers, even those who could read.

But even if they are hard to see, which some are, they are nevertheless visible and meant to communicate through vision. What do they communicate? Again, we can begin to separate out a few lines of messages here—the explicit or intellectual message of the stories, which can be read and studied, are about the Buddha's history and his perfection over many lifetimes and in many contexts leading up to his final life as Shakyamuni. These illustrate great acts of generosity—like the famous gift of his body to the hungry tigress, or lesser known stories like the dancer, where the bodhisattva is a dancer who sings about impermanence and so teaches many in the audience about a better path, or the story of the "Chusig" duck who stops the negative behaviours of one of his flock, a cannibalistic bird who is feasting on eggs and young of others but who is shown to regret his negative actions and stop. These are explicit messages—about great perfected behaviour that is possible no matter what condition, or form, you are born into. But what are the less explicit messages being communicated here? The immense diversity and power of the Buddha who lived in many (all) places and times, hence his omniscience; The diversity of the world and the possibility of enlightened action in any context, any birth, as either king or slave, animal or human, great enlightened activity is a possible choice. Why books are important, how they are organized, and what they can do is also being explained here. This wall design, where the stories are both illustrated and shown as long inscribed Tibetan texts, actively

show what books are and how they are organized. The inscriptions look like pages of text, like the horizontal, wide, pecha page that monks of this temple would actually have read from, writ large for the wall. Above each page of text the visual image explodes and opens the most important scenes of the story. So here, even for illiterate viewers who can't read the words of the inscriptions, these paintings show that books contain stories. The stories pop out and above the book pages of the wall, coming alive. The wall thus illustrates that books, even those you may not be able to read, contain much merit and history in themselves.

So these three examples, the Jina Buddhas and Achala paintings of a shrine room, and the *Jataka* stories of the outer passage wall, all on the ground floor, a space accessible to both the literate monks and the illiterate laity of fourteenth century, a "public" space of devotion and pilgrimage. The paintings here are made to invite and educate this diverse audience, partially literate, partially unable to read, in a more experiential way that involves and employs both their bodies and emotions—the wonder of being in audience to the beautiful Buddhas, the thrill of fear that the wrathful Achala could strike one with a sword, the experience of being encircled by a book, dwarfed by its very own structure. These make one not only think but also feel, they make one not only understand rationally but employ emotion and embodiment to create an experience. The experience, one that uses the human tools of sense and emotion, is the entry way to the invitation to greater practice, devotion, meditation, study, depending on who is receiving the message (monk or layperson).

By contrast, upstairs at the temple of Shalu are very different kinds of paintings—they look different and they work differently as well, and it is my argument here that this is because they are meant to teach to a different audience different things. In each of the four upper level shrine rooms, complex mandala paintings, with tiny painted lineage figures attendant to each of them, are painted all

the way from the floors to ceilings. These are very different images in many ways. They are like maps or diagrams that organize a lot of information visually. The enlightened beings that populate these scenes, which number into the hundreds on each wall, are much smaller than those huge Jina Buddhas of the first-floor shrine, since now they are multiplied in relationship to a whole complex diagram that shows many such enlightened figures in an expansive diagrammatic palace setting.

These paintings operate differently—they are still meant to educate but the message may be understood to be quite different. The mandalas express relative organizations of huge, textual, sets. Each mandala represents one of these books, and the space between them, represents their relationships in and to (and possibly even relative importance to) one another. This is a visual shorthand that contains and organizes a vast amount of information. The paintings explain that sets of specific teachers have passed down, and authorized, teachings, and further, that these teachings operate in relationship to one another—Tantras related to other Tantras, for the mandalas each illustrate a text or Tantra focused on a deity. In the inscriptions that accompany these mandala paintings their author tells us about choices made in the production of these images that are related to his consultation of many Buddhist texts, in long inscriptions by the doorways to these shrines that were authored by the eminent Lama, Butön Rinchen Drub (bu ston rin chen grub), who served as the abbot of Shalu monastery from 1320 to 1356. Butön was a learned scholar, and also specifically famous as an important collector and organizer of the Tibetan canons.

The production of these maṇḍala paintings, like the production of the many textual collections Butön and his team would produce, represented wide reading and careful editorial work: numerous texts had been consulted and compared in the formation of these paintings. Furthermore, these newly created

images demanded the creation of new texts: and Butön authored long commentarial writings about these maṇḍala paintings that were then added onto the walls of the rooms as long inscriptions alongside these paintings.[2] In the commentarial writings produced for the walls Butön explains the paintings and the choices made in their production with specific recourse to his knowledge and consultation with texts.

These inscriptions reveal a complex relationship between the production of images and the creation of texts. Flanking the doors of the Upper eastern Tengyur shrine, the long inscription passage begins with dedicatory exhortations, praise to the donors, and then quickly evolves into a thorough and detailed descriptive analysis of the painted maṇḍalas of the room:

> They were designed like this: In the center there is the maṇḍala of the Dharmadhatu Lord of speech (*Chos kyi dbyings gsung gi dbang phyugs gi dkyil 'khor*), this maṇḍala is explained in two texts: a section of the *Vajradhatu*, and also in the *Yoga Tantra* of the *Manjushri Nama Sangiti*. This maṇḍala has two systems: the system of Master 'Jam dpal grags pa (Manjusrikirti)

2 These inscriptions appear in each of the four upper floor shrine rooms, though today are very damaged in both the north and west shrines. The inscriptions of the eastern shrine and southern shrine are well preserved. In the eastern shrine they flank both sides of the door on the inside of the room, and in the southern shrine they appear only to the left of the door on the shrine's interior. They also survive in print as found in Butön's collected works. Butön Rinchen drup, *Catalogue of the Excellent Maṇḍalas of the Large Shrines of the Four Directions of Shalu (Zhwa Lu'i Gtsug Lag Khang Gi Gzhal Yas Khang Nub Ma Byang Ma Shar Ma Lho Ma Rnams Na Bzhugs Pa'i Dkyil 'Khor Sogs Kyi Dkar Chag)*, vol. 17, gSung 'Bum Rin Chen Grub Bris Ma (Pe cin: krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang, 2008), 39, http://tbrc.org/link?RID=O1PD81200|O1PD812001PD81396$W1PD45496., 17:7–56.

> and that of Master 'Jigs med 'byung gnas sbas pa (Abhayākaragupta). Here we follow mainly the teacher 'Jam dpal grags pa (Manjusrikirti).[3]

The inscription clearly states that texts have been read and followed in forming the maṇḍala paintings. Furthermore, nothing has been followed without comparative analysis, and these different Indian systems have been compared in the decision about what to paint. The specific choice of which system to follow is then carried into other choices. The inscription goes on to apply this systematic and comparative approach to individual visual elements:

> Inside the root maṇḍala some people accept nine maṇḍalas, but this is wrong. Because this is not explained in either of their systems (of Abhayākaragupta and Manjusrikirti) nor does any clear text mention this. Some people say the inner of all three maṇḍalas should have no pediments (*rta babs*), but this is wrong. Because some texts say to make a square and put four doors and decorate it with four pediments, which means that the maṇḍala square with pediments is clearly mentioned. Although the texts do not clearly state whether the round maṇḍala does or does not have pediments, according to the *Phrel ba* and the traditions of previous lamas, they both say that they should have pediments, so that is why

3 *bkod pa 'di ltar lags / 'di ltar / dbus na rdo rje dbyings kyi kyi dum bu las 'phros shing / de dang cha cha mthun pa 'jam dpal gyi mtshan yang dag par brjod pa rnal 'byor gyi rgyud du dgongs pa bkral ba chos kyi dbyings gsung gi dbang gi dbang phyugs gi dkyil 'khor te / 'di la slob dpon 'jam dpal 'jam dpal grags pa'i lugs dang dang / slob dpon 'jig med 'byung nas sbas pa'i lugs gnyis las / 'dir slob dpon 'jam dpal 'jam dpal grags pa'i lugs gtso bor byas te /* Ibid., 17:32.

here we have made pediments.[4]

The inscriptions reveal the editorial prowess- the reading and decision making, that informed the images. And so the images also show and tell younger monks who train in those rooms about the scholastic work—the reading and decision making, that is required of great scholars.

Who were these rooms for and their detailed and complicated images of mandala, deities and lineages? Monks in training, monks being taught to remember and know texts, and most importantly, monks who wanted to recall relationships between them. As this space is, I believe, meant as training rooms for monks, likely a part of the tantric college that we know was operating at Shalu while Butön was abbot, these rooms were made to reflect for monks the organizational power of books and book collections and also create these as a physical, embodied experience. Placing a monk viewer into relationship with all the mandalas of the yoga tantras at once! Here monks were encircled by the knowledge, the editing, the organizing, the planning of the yoga tantras into relationship with one another around their bodies as they undertook the work to learn, memorize, and study these complex texts themselves.

This example has shown how a specific fourteenth century Tibetan temple used its mural arts to contribute to the learning

4 The wall inscription reads: *'di la 'ag 'azhiga rtsa ba'i dkyil 'khor gyi nang nang du dkyil 'khor dgu bzhes pa ni / lug gnyis ka la med med cing cing / gzhung gsal kha can ma byung la / nang gi dkyil 'khor gsum la rta babs med par 'dod pa ni / gru bzhir bgyi zhing sgo bzhis ni rnam par brgyan / zhes dkyil 'khor gru bzhi rta babs can gsungs la / de'i yang phyi rol bri bya bar / phyi rol rdo rje rigs kyi rigs kyi gnas / zlum zhing kun kun tu bzang ba dang / zhes dkyil 'khor gru bzhi'i phyi rol du dkyil 'khor zlum bu gsungs pas chos kyi dkyil 'khor rta babs can yin la / dkyil 'khor zlum bu la la rta babs yod med kyi kyi gsal kha ma gsungs kyang / phreng ba dang bla ma gong ma rnams bzhed pa bzhin rta babs yod par byas so so* /Ibid., 17:32–33.

that was designed to take place in particular spaces of the temple, and how different art was made for different kinds of learning and learners. For some of the monastic learners, who read and memorized complex, esoteric, philosophical texts, mural images were blueprints of organizational systems and editorial processes. For lay patrons of the temple other paintings invited them into emotional and physical access, through the visual and the material, with the enlightened realm, and the book. At Shalu, temples were made through art to communicate "books" but made these even accessible to (often illiterate) people, and art was thus an important way of opening and teaching Buddhism. The temple was a full-body multi-sensory experience of books and stories communicated through art.

And how does this all connect to our topic of contemporary society? Art is still an invaluable communicative strategy, a method of teaching, sharing and inviting dialogue and interest, and of teaching through connection. Indeed, in a very different context, in my own small world of the Canadian University classroom, I am finding that students new to the study of Buddhism can and do still learn in different ways about Buddhism in and through experiences of Buddhist art.

In my Introduction to Buddhism class I start with objects. I bring a collection of small statues, paintings, painted manuscripts, and I pass them out in that very first class and ask students to spend time with them and write down or discuss with one another: What is this? What does it represent? How was it used? What does it show about Buddhism? Who made it? How, why and when? It is important in this beginning to remain open, and to let students generate their own answers, even if these are still guesses. Nothing is wrong at this point, because I want them to get thinking and involved.

This opening conversation, where the invitation comes through the physical art object, invites many more people in the

class to speak and to share – they feel more comfortable expressing things, because at this point in the course they don't need to know the answers, but are instead invited to form questions. Objects bring out different questions for them. When confronted with a small image of Green Tara or Guanyin, they are not sure how to read the gender of the figure or say things like "I did not know the Buddha could ever be a woman." Their first impulse is often to say things like "I guess these are to be meditated on" since their understanding of Buddhism in the west is often that it is exclusively about meditation practice. Gradually through the repeated exposure to these objects, we discuss many other vectors for practice that are not exclusively about mental practice, but are also physical and material. The shrine images of temples often fed and clothed and bowed to are examples of ways that material objects ground practice that is not merely intellectual or mental, but manifestly physical and material. They start to understand and see the material, the art, as one of the avenues to the philosophical and mental. While we are ostensibly talking about how art did this for other "Buddhists" in historic places (ancient India, China, Tibet etc.) they, my young Canadian students, are also experiencing this same thing.

In the classroom I tell them they do not have to treat the statues we use and bring like devotional objects. I encourage them to hold them, smell them, even shake them lightly to hear if they contain anything. When they hear the rattling inside of the metal Tibetan statues, we talk about what is there and why. What is hidden from view? This opens up a discussion about the importance of relics and the many things that are contained and not seen but are part of the material of devotion. How objects can make physical, but not always visible, the things that they are vivified by. What does it mean to have a small pole inside a statue that represents, like a spinal column, the pillar of the life force within it? For whom was it important to include that and why, and

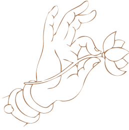
what does it mean about how this statue was understood? Or what does it mean to "open the eyes" of a painting by dotting them in, or painting syllables over the main power points of the body of a deity on the unseen back of a painting? Why do/did Buddhists do these things and what do they show us about how (some forms of) Buddhism work for and on people? Indeed, other than seeing the entire Buddhist sets of practices as intellectual exercises, these show students how embodied and physical devotion can be as well.

Throughout the course I use the objects in multiple contexts and ways. We connect them to teachings (illustrating the life of the Buddha) and discuss the symbolic language used to express the concept of the condition of enlightenment. The lotus flower emerging from muddy waters, recurrent in so many places in Buddhist arts, as a symbol that expresses what is possible for the human mind, also emerging pure from the dirty world of samsara, they see, experience, and intellectualize. They start to see it everywhere. We have conversations that I feel certain would not happen if the objects were not there: Why do crowns or scarves look the way they do on Buddhist deities from different times and places, what was the relationship between ideas and craftspeople, what mobilized that exchange? My students need to confront ideas not just as intellectual constructs, but as embodied, physical, material, visual realities too.

For their course papers they also write about historic Buddhist objects in museums. Doing so forces them to confront specific times and places and people who made and used those objects, and to think not only about what they thought and understood, but also about how present Buddhism was made in their lives in and through objects. Meditation was part of what people did and do in Buddhism, though not the only thing that people do and did, but the art also helps students to better connect to the kinds of lessons and ideas that were being meditated upon: perfection, wisdom, enlightenment. Art has the capacity to connect directly

with students, and they then imagine themselves in physical, or temporal, or geographic, connection to other people who made, saw, and used those objects. Objects bridge divides.

Buddhist societies all over the world and for the past two thousand years have made beautiful art. This beautiful art remains an invitation to know and experience more, and invites people of all different experiences to want to know more of the incredible universe that Buddhist teachings can open up.



Those who have faith in religion are the wealthiest.
Those who are virtuous can be the most peaceful in their minds.
Those who practice well are the most powerful.
Those who are intelligent are the most perspicuous.

—Source: *The Everlasting Light: Dharma Thoughts of Master Hsing Yun*