Kristin Scheible, Reflection on Research

The Past

I earned my doctorate in 2006 from Harvard University, where I focused on two immense yet related religious traditions: Buddhism and Hinduism. Accessing essential texts for my work in these two fields required learning Sanskrit and its relative, Pāli. I also studied the historical forces that shaped the traditions responsible for these texts, as well as the history of religious thought that undergirds the study of comparative religions in the West, fueling this vibrant, rigorous scholarly discipline.

From the beginning of my studies, what most grabbed my attention was the relationship of ideas that persists among early medieval Buddhist texts, the intellectual forces that shape current twenty-first century Buddhism, and the way these manifest in the life of practicing Buddhists. At Harvard I began to shape a scholarly focus whose trajectory continues to influence my scholarship to the current day: the ethical current that has run through Buddhism since its inception in the fifth century BCE, penetrating right into the present. In my scholarship I strive to articulate the strength of this current as something of both intellectual and personal significance for contemporary Buddhists, for my peers in Buddhist studies, and for my students at Bard, who are profoundly drawn to and fascinated by Buddhism.

My dissertation, “For the Anxious Thrill and Serene Satisfaction of Good People:” Rethinking the Pāli Mahāvaṃsa, sprung forth from the realization that the ancient South Asian religious texts not only stimulate faith; as importantly, they motivate behaviors, activate interpretive domains, and promote ethical transformation. This early medieval Buddhist text continues to be vividly significant for the present faithful; for instance, the rhetoric of this particular history text is known to fuel some of the tension in the recent twenty-five year long civil war in Sri Lanka. This polemicized use has influenced the way the vaṃsa (Buddhist histories; chronicles) tradition is usually interpreted, by practicing Buddhists and scholars alike, in the twenty-first century: as a political charter. In the dissertation I focused instead on the literary interpretation of the Mahāvaṃsa, one that contains and expresses its underlying ethical and religious themes and that considers the concerns of the intellectual and ethical world responsible for its production and sustained relevance. This dissertation was my initial move to define the larger research project that has dominated my intellectual life since then: to retranslate and critically reread Buddhist texts in order to bring out the interpretive richness that permeates the complex narratives of these multivalent religious texts.

When I began teaching at Bard with only a prospectus and rudimentary chapter in hand, I knew it would be a challenge to balance teaching and research. I had experience leading discussion sections for lecture classes at Harvard, and I had lectured myself at Brown, but I was still an underdeveloped scholar, since I had eschewed the normal channels of pre-professional preparation (I'd turned down a dissertation fellowship for the chance to begin teaching at Bard). It turns out that this choice has made strategic sense in the long run, as I have been able to try out my scholarly ideas on exceptionally gifted and insightful undergraduates, and this in turn has enabled me to learn to convey somewhat
difficult and even arcane religious ideas in a language that would saliently speak to the twenty-first century West. After three years teaching full time as a Visiting Assistant Professor, I successfully defended my dissertation and began to define a new trajectory for my research.

My goal was to shed some of the (perceived or real) scholarly isolation I had unintentionally developed, working on the dissertation at some distance from my original scholarly community at Harvard. So I count myself extraordinarily fortunate that in the midst of the dissertation mindset that dominated my first few years at Bard, my Religion Program colleagues Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner invited me to participate in several conferences with leading scholars in Religion. Together with Richard Davis, my senior colleague in Hindu studies, these scholars have provided a model for how active and successful professors, each with his own research projects, can also dedicate time and energy to work collaboratively on other worthy projects, outside any one scholar’s particular purview. I now see this kind of scholarly collaboration as an extraordinary virtue, and key to being relevant in one’s field. Reconnecting with my former adviser Charlie Hallisey at one such conference (the Golden Rule in the Religions of the World, April, 2008) was an especially expedient catalyst for my productivity. Presenting my ideas on my home turf, with eminent scholars as my audience, has opened the door for me to my current productivity.

Shortly before my 2009 pre-tenure review, I presented “Priming the lamp of dhamma: the Buddha’s miracles in the Pāli Mahāvamsa,” at the International Association of Buddhist Studies meeting in Atlanta. I was thrilled to showcase, for the first time, work stemming from my dissertation in this forum of specialists. There, among internationally recognized scholars in my field, I entered into rewarding conversations and forged some valuable intellectual connections. Encouraged by positive feedback and energized by critical reflections, I began to stretch both back and forward in my research repertoire. My dissertation had focused on the work of the Pāli vaṃsas; to further and broaden my work in my larger research project, I turned some of the reading strategies I had been employing on the vaṃsas to new source texts.

Having studied Kawi (Old Javanese), I read the little known Indonesian historical text Desawarnana, also called Nagarakrtagama, a eulogistic kakawin (Sanskrit, kāvyā; English, poem), and wrote an exploratory paper accepted for the omnibus section to premiere new research in Buddhist Studies at the annual American Academy of Religion conference. The conference presentation initiated interesting discussions about the use of poetry in Buddhist and Hindu-Buddhist chronicling, and the use of rhetorical flourishes to further an argument in an ostensibly historical catalogue. It is currently on the back burner and has been on a slow simmer there; I have since thought through many of the problems I encountered with this text and have new ways to approach it in mind. Sheldon Pollock’s recent publications exploring the work of kāvyā have guided my inquiries and framed my approach. In the next year I will probably finish this piece of research, since it is well begun.

I found another avenue for my productivity through a short, introductory piece of writing, “The Theravāda Tradition,” in Introduction to World Religions: Communities and
Kristin Scheible

*Cultures*, edited by Jacob Neusner (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010). In this introduction to Theravāda, I reduced the tradition to the single most motivating factor: the question, what is to be done? In the process of surveying a religious tradition in a clear and concise way, I remembered a forum our Program had convened my first year at Bard on miracles in world religions, centered on Kenneth Woodward’s then-recent book. As a rather audacious ABD I had seemingly picked a fight with him at the lunch, arguing that Buddhism is at its core an ethical system, where he saw it as primarily faith-driven. Writing this piece, in my mind, further clarified to me the mutually constitutive dimension of faith and reasoned, intentional, ethical motivation and behavior, a conviction that has infused my writing ever since.

In my reading, the Pāli chronicles, canonical sources, and commentaries all ask a crucial question: what is the best life to pursue for human beings? Through their many narrative facets they are literary manifestations of faith. They enshrine the values, aspirations, and judgments of layers of Buddhist communities. Over the course of time, working through their many interpretive layers, one begins to discern core motivations that hold a religious tradition together through the vehicle of its ancient texts.

What is especially fascinating to me is the way Buddhism's deepest truths are revealed (or argued) through the use of narrative. Moral didacticism, in Buddhist texts as in those of other religious traditions, is not exclusively disseminated through apophatic or cataphatic channels (hiding or disclosing revelation from on high, using negative or positive descriptive language); lessons instead are explored, argued, matured, and celebrated in the narrative domain. Behaviors are not inculcated to respond to the “shoulds for shoulds’ sakes,” i.e., deontological concerns. Instead, in the *vamsa* and commentarial literary tradition narrative explores how consequences matter deeply, actions are evaluated before, during, and after their manifestation, and actions explain the past, present, and future events. Any action has a pre-percussion and repercussion, which expands the possibilities for the ways narratives are created, heard, felt, and used into the future and the way-distant past.

In my continuing challenge to explore the relevance of my Pāli materials to contemporary lived religion, as well as the perception of time in the choices Buddhists make, I wrote “‘Give me my inheritance’: Western Buddhists and Raising Children of the Buddha,” appearing in *Little Buddhas: Buddhist Children in Texts and Culture*, edited by Vanessa Sasson (October 2012, Oxford University Press). This volume showcases work from leading scholars in the field of Buddhist Studies on a little researched topic, children. The Duke University Buddhist chaplain and scholar Sumi Loundon Kim has since asked me for feedback on her latest Buddhist curricular project pre-publication because of this article, and so I have an immediate sense of this article’s impact.

**The Present and Future**

Currently I have one book manuscript out for external review (Columbia University Press, SAAD), tentatively entitled *Religiously Reading: the Literary Aims of a Buddhist History*. This began as my dissertation revision, but as anyone who has turned a dissertation into a book knows, it has taken on its own life that removes it far from its
Kristin Scheible

original articulation. As I await its fate, I am writing two short book reviews solicited from the editors of H-NET Buddhist Scholars Information Network, the academic Buddhist Studies list-serve, perhaps more widely read than any journal in our field. I have also begun a paper entitled “Agitations and Aspirations for proximity to the future Buddha in Theravāda sources,” solicited for the second year of a three-year collaborative, comparative inquiry into messianism in religions, aiming for publication. This paper will be delivered in the Comparative Studies in Religion Section panel Comparative Messianism: Figuration and Expectation in Non-Abrahamic Religions at this November’s American Academy of Religion annual meeting. I am also in the process of completing a revision of a very early piece of my pedagogically reflective writing that is now scheduled to go to press in May, 2014.

In the meantime, I have begun my second project, a book with the working title Fruitful Metaphors: Cultivating Faith in the Indic Imagination. I am examining a range of Hindu and Buddhist texts, from the famous passage in Book 6 of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (where the teacher Uddālaka has his son/pupil Svetaketu bring him a tiny, palpably empty fig seed to crack open to find the mysterious essence of life), to canonical Buddhist texts such as the Kasibharadvaja Sutta, to a thirteenth century Sinhalese commentarial text on the Dhammapadāṭṭhakathā (already a commentary on the canonical Dhammapada), the Saddharmaratnāvaliya. Images of cultivation (of “fields of merit”), the planting of seeds (of karma), and the ripening of actions abound in South Asian religious literature, from sutras to Hindu devotional poetry; the karma of action is said to vipāka, or “ripen” into its effects, the karmaphala, literally “fruits of action”. The book that will emerge from these studies will consider whether right now, as society removes itself from direct connection to – and responsibility for – agricultural production, powerful ethical metaphors having to do with the cultivation of food may lose their motivational impact for current Buddhist communities (as they do in the other religious traditions as well). I conclude with an evaluation from the perspective of a religious scholar of the impact, ethical and religious, of the Green Revolution in South Asia, and of contemporary local food and organic movements. Having traveled the world in my youth from organic farm to organic farm, and growing and consuming a large part of my own food, this is far from a solely academic exploration. I am in the midst of research (for me, this means a lot of translation and reading), and once my first book is fully launched I will be ready to move from the exploratory writing phase into completing the book proposal.

Since projects, too, grow organically, I could imagine a broader, more general comparative book springing to life – one that would move beyond Indic sources and into the realm of comparative religion. I would like an excuse to move to a consideration of the fertile metaphors in other religious traditions, perhaps beginning with Mencius and his use of sprouts in articulating ethical truisms. I would look in particular at the mustard seed of the New Testament (Matthew 13, Matthew 17, Mark 4, Luke 13, Luke 17), compared to its use in the Buddhist commentarial literature, such as that enshrined in the story of Kiṣāgotamī (the mother who could cure her son of death, should she be able to procure a ubiquitous mustard seed from the home that had never experienced death). Again, my interests are both in the ethical lesson within the story (what to do?) and in the methods of conveyance through metaphor to the audience outside the text.
I am also pursuing a project of fruitful collaboration with my colleagues Maria Heim at Amherst College and Andy Rotman at Smith College. The project we envision has already evolved in scope as we have developed a grant application; should we receive funding, this book would begin to take shape Spring 2015. We have noted that we frequently rely on particular texts in our Buddhist studies classes (such as “The Tigress” from Ārya Śūra’s Jātakamālā, or Thich Nhat Hanh’s poetry). Yet we infrequently discuss these choices, or our particular readings of them. We will be reading a selection of Buddhist texts together, articulating reading practices based on traditional and modern reading practices in Buddhist Studies, all the while learning from and contributing to allied or adjacent fields of study.

Other projects I look forward to, especially salient should Bard continue its interest in liberal arts education in Burma, would necessitate my return to Burma where I had done fieldwork early in my doctoral studies. I envision applying my literary-critical lens to the Kalyani inscriptions, epigraphical evidence of the Mahāvihāra’s reformation of Burmese Buddhism, located in Pegu/Bago.  I would like to, as well, consider various Burmese chronicles modeled upon the Pāli vaṃsa genre, and how they are, or are not, serving the contemporary Burmese in the process of identity formation.

**Professional and active scholarly engagement with the discipline**

My peers have recognized my current and potential future place as a researcher in my field by trusting me to help steer the direction of Buddhist Studies research. In 2011, I was elected by peers in my field to serve on the Steering Committee of the American Academy of Religion’s Buddhism Section, one of the largest individual programs within the body of the AAR; in this capacity I have my finger directly on the pulse of my field as I review paper and panel proposals annually, conferring closely with esteemed colleagues on the steering committee to help determine the shape of our field’s discourse.

My ability as a researcher and my interest in the direction of research in the humanities in general, outside of my field, has also been recognized. Last summer, I was invited to review Religion scholars’ applications for grants for the National Endowment for the Humanities in D.C. It was eye-opening, to be sure, to be on the other side of the process, to be a part of the rigor and seriousness of the evaluation process, and to be a small part of keeping the humanities writ large healthy. I have since been invited to participate in the NEH grants panel at this November’s AAR annual meeting.  After a brief information session about the NEH, four former panelists (including myself) as well as the NEH Research Division Program Officer will be staging a mock evaluation session to illustrate the process.

I am a regular participant in the Five Colleges Buddhist Studies Faculty Seminar events that draw scholars from Yale, Emory, Dartmouth, Williams and Harvard, well beyond Amherst, Hampshire, Mount Holyoke, Smith and UMass. Buddhist Studies have become something of an intellectual vortex in this area, with a concentration of excellent scholars representing a variety of sub-fields. This particular scholarly outlet has provided me a forum to workshop my first book, and it has engendered productive conversations with colleagues toward a collaborative new project.
I am actively engaged in giving papers and appearing on panels at academic conferences. I was asked to be in the closing panel (together with the then-president of the Association for Asian Studies) on the state of the field at the Mid-Atlantic Region Association of Asian Studies held at Rutgers University in 2008. I have presented and participated in the preeminent, peer-reviewed outlets for Buddhist Studies scholarship, namely the International Association of Buddhist Studies Conference (held once every 3-4 years) and within the Buddhism Section of the American Academy of Religion annual conference, within an omnibus section designed to showcase new directions in research in Buddhist Studies. I have been invited to contribute to three separate edited volumes that feature the work of some of the best scholars in my field. Being invited to present my writing, my research, and my ideas alongside such notables has helped establish my place within my field and has given me the confidence that my larger research projects will find readership both within my field and, I hope, in the larger world of comparative religious studies.

I hope that this brief intellectual biography conveys my sense that I am an actively engaged scholar in my discipline. I regularly present my research at conferences, and have a public profile. I have an article published in the top peer-reviewed journal in Buddhist Studies, chapters in edited volumes filled with influential senior scholars, and have my first book manuscript currently under external review with a top publisher in my field. These works of research, along with my dissertation, have all helped me firmly establish my larger research project within my field, which is to advocate for close, careful, literarily-sensitive reading to shed new light on old texts.