

Listen and Learn: Equity, Embodied Pedagogies, and Engaging Asian American Buddhists

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we consider the intersection of experiential learning and equity work through the lens of a ten-week project: “Listening to the Buddhists in Our Backyard” (L2BB), undertaken in collaboration with a group of six high school seniors at Phillips Academy (Andover, MA) in the spring of 2022. L2BB was part of a broader undertaking known as The Workshop, an experimental school-within-a-school that seeks to reimagine education beyond the restrictive norms or “grammar” of schooling. Mirroring the emergent and adaptive methods of L2BB, this paper incorporates student voices, narrative interviews, and methodological reflections to advance our claim that an embodied, listening-first model of learning avoids common pitfalls of community-based learning while enabling students to develop a more accurate picture of racial and religious minorities in the United States.

KEYWORDS

listening pedagogy, American Buddhism, Asian American Buddhism, Asian American, experiential learning, Buddhism, listening, equity

The Buddha famously said: “All compounded things are subject to vanish.” At a time in my life when I am wrapping up my high school career and transitioning to college and adulthood, the idea of impermanence is actually profoundly grounding; at any point in time, we have the power to redirect our stories and redirect our lives’ work.

–Olivia (Yang, 2022)¹ [p396]

In the temples we've visited, we've been shown a new kind of generosity and humility. I have acknowledged that my enrollment in this high school didn't entitle me to any intellect I don't have to work for, and I've had to work harder in this ungraded term than any term before... I have found myself disproving my own belief that deadlines, close monitoring, and grades were the only route toward learning.

–Loulou (Sloss, 2022)¹

To be more observant. The “See, Think, Wonder” practice—I love it, it's great. To ask more questions, first and foremost, of interesting people. Write more... it doesn't have to be perfect. To be more intentional in how I act, how I speak, how I exist in the world.

–Taylor (Dunn, personal communication, exit interview, June 1, 2022)²

I finally understand how people find refuge in spirituality, and I have been able to detach myself from the punitive and fear-inducing manifestation of Catholicism that I grew up with—a revelation I would not have come to by reading chapters in a textbook. I now see Buddhism for its multifacetedness, and I know that I’ve only scratched the surface of how people find refuge and seek growth in a spiritual community.

–Melissa (Damasceno, 2022)¹

[T]he monastics and lay people I met and conversed with shared values that are often spoken of but rarely embodied in the competitive environment among my peers: genuine kindness and community. From offering wisdom to gifting oranges, I felt immensely inspired to reconsider my view of life as an individualistic pursuit, and instead refocused on creating meaningful connections and contributing to my communities.

–Lesley (Tan, 2022)¹

What is *dana* [generosity], beyond its dictionary definition? Through communal, direct learning from oral stories at various temples, I have come to a better sense of the shapelessness, realness, and application of *dana* from a conceptual framework: *dana* is what gracefully brings together a stranger, a monk, a grandma, a mother, and a granddaughter, intimately bridging relationships, communities, and generations.

–Haruka (So, 2022)¹

GROUP NORMZ: Be comfortable saying “I don’t know”

– Andy, Chenxing, Haruka, Lesley, Loulou, Mel, Olivia, and Taylor:
Listening to the Buddhists in Our Backyard (L2BB) 2022 Team³ [p397]

In the introduction to her book *Race Sounds*, Nicole Furlonge (2018) advocates for “listening as an artistic, civic, and interpretive practice that emerges from a place of wonder, curiosity, and *not knowing*” (p. 2, emphasis in original). This full-bodied and whole-hearted praxis of listening is a critical foundation for lifelong learning, both inside and outside the classroom. However, instilling this praxis—particularly when it comes to educating youth from privileged communities—is not without risk. Katy Swalwell (2013) underscores the challenges of designing learning environments where students are capable of “addressing issues of injustice without exoticizing the Other, romanticizing the plight of marginalized people, or reifying deficit stereotypes about people from different racial, ethnic, and social class groups” (p. 53).

To address Swalwell’s concerns, we advocate for a listening-first pedagogy that begins with immersive learning experiences and continues with an ongoing practice of centering the voices and perspectives of community members. The student quotes that open this article attest to the transformative potential of pedagogical approaches that center the civic and moral ideals put forward by Furlonge—wonder, curiosity, and not knowing. In this article, we consider the intersection of experiential learning and equity work through the lens of a ten-week project: “Listening to the Buddhists in Our Backyard” (L2BB), undertaken in collaboration with a group of six high school seniors at Phillips Academy (Andover, MA) in the spring of 2022.

We began the spring term with an eight-day stretch of visits to nine Buddhist temples within a fifteen-mile radius of the Andover campus (plus a few additional sites in nearby Cambridge). During these visits, we met monastics and laypeople from the local Chinese, Khmer, Lao, Thai, and Vietnamese Buddhist communities. Our gracious hosts often invited us to stay for several hours, patiently answering our many questions and giving us the opportunity to engage our six senses—to use a Buddhist concept—of sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and thinking (Bodhi, 2012).

After this immersion in these diverse environments, the students spent the rest of the term pursuing research and writing that emerged from their observations and interests. They delved into educational theory and ethnographic studies of Buddhist communities. Just as important, they met directly with a range of experts beyond the teaching team: monastics, lay volunteers, and professors of history, religion, and Buddhist studies. They returned to temples to attend religious services, practice participant observation at youth groups, volunteer during Buddhist holiday celebrations, and conduct interviews.⁴ Their learning culminated in two public-facing presentations—one on Zoom and one in person—to more than 100 people, including many of the experts whose books they had read.

The six students in L2BB were part of a broader undertaking at Phillips Academy known as The Workshop, an experimental school-within-a-school that seeks to reimagine what educational researchers call the grammar of schooling: “age-graded classrooms, division of the curriculum into discrete academic subjects, the creation of different academic tracks, and a teacher-centered pedagogy that expects all students to absorb knowledge and skills in lockstep” (Mehta & Fine 2019, p. 35). Spring-term [p398] seniors who elect to participate in The Workshop drop all of their typical academic classes and instead participate in one of several thematically linked projects over the course of the term. In place of traditional grades and tests, they receive extensive feedback, have abundant time for self-reflection, and present their research to broader publics beyond their teachers and peers.

We encountered many challenges in piloting L2BB for the first time: from illnesses during a time when the COVID-19 Omicron variant was circulating widely, to our lack of fluency in the Asian languages of the temples we visited, to pedagogical growing pains as we tried to balance our aspirations for emergent, student-driven learning with the ways in which our spring term seniors had been socialized to “do school” (Pope, 2003). As teachers as well as co-learners alongside our students, we explored new approaches to learning, collaboration, and accountability—all the while guided by Zaretta Hammond’s (2020) argument that “instructional equity happens when the teacher is scaffolding learning to the point that *the scaffold at some moment falls away, so that the student becomes independent* [emphasis in original].”

We did not always succeed in finding this middle way between scaffolding and independence. In interviews with students at the conclusion of L2BB, several of them articulated ways in which they felt disoriented by the lack of structure. As one student, Olivia, recalled:

The challenge for me was, how do I organize all this information, especially right when we came back from the visits? That was the most challenging time academically for me because I didn’t know where we were going.... We didn’t really have a path—which is okay—but had we recognized that we didn’t have a path and were more proactive about changing it, I would have felt more grounded. But since we didn’t name that we didn’t have a path, I wondered, “Will it be like this forever?” (O. Yang, personal communication during exit interview, June 2, 2022)

Olivia went on to acknowledge that “once [she] had a direction, it was more motivating to work.” Nonetheless, her initial confusion speaks to ways in which we could have better scaffolded the learning environment. This intellectual uncertainty occasionally spilled over into interpersonal conflict among group members, and we did our best to seek a balance between overly managing group dynamics and being too hands-off. In many ways, this was a case study in the potential and challenges that accompany group learning. The students would almost certainly have benefitted from more time and connection outside our small group, and we plan to address that in 2023 by having our new cohort of students connect in more sustained ways with local scholars.

Despite these limitations, L2BB pushed us to move past transactional models of relationship whereby students “helped” a disadvantaged group in exchange for community service credit and its corresponding aura of moral uprightness—which lends itself to the cynical intention of impressing college admission officers, as several of our students pointed out. The Buddhist temples we visited might be seen as [p399] disadvantaged: in that they were founded, and their members, on the whole, do not occupy the upper echelons of American society. From the outset, our students wrestled with the ethical implications of visiting these temples as representatives of a highly resourced boarding school that, like other elite independent schools around the nation, are often perceived as preparing their students for careers of prestige and power.

Entering into the temples with respect and humility, with the intention of listening to and learning from those whose voices have been systematically undervalued and overlooked, our students didn’t so much see their neighbors anew as they *knew* of them for the first time. And it wasn’t just our students. Andy had taught Asian Religions for 12 years at Andover, but had not previously visited these local Buddhist communities. Despite having written a book on Asian American Buddhists (Han, 2021), Chenxing had not expected to find such a high density of Buddhist temples in the Andover area, 3,000 miles away from her home base in the San Francisco Bay Area. When our students shared about their temple visits with a group of older and predominantly white practitioners, they learned that many of the group’s members, despite having meditated for decades, had never noticed the existence of these neighboring Buddhists.

We did not begin the term explicitly framing L2BB in terms of equity, but our students engaged in a prerequisite of equity work by continuously asking themselves: Who are we neglecting to think about? Whose existence have we not even registered?

Andy Housiaux: Chenxing, L2BB was directly inspired by your first book, *Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists*. Why did you write the book the way that you did, and who was your intended audience?

Chenxing Han: As you know, *Be the Refuge* began as a master’s thesis at the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Berkeley, California. Nearly a decade passed between my first interview and the book’s publication. Over this period, I actually wrote two completely different versions of the manuscript. In the first version, I was so focused on pushing back against “two Buddhisms”—a long-standing trope in both academic and popular discourse that divides American Buddhism into white converts and Asian immigrants and often pans out into Orientalist and racist rhetorics (Han, 2021, p. 10)—that I ended up with what felt like an elephantine screed (with all due

respect to these pachyderms, so beloved in Buddhist cultures around the world!) aimed at a handful of white male scholars.

Luckily, with the help of mentors and friends, I developed a second version with a different audience in mind. Considerations of power and privilege didn't disappear: I was still aware that while Buddhists make up only about 1% of the U.S. population, [p400] over two-thirds are of Asian heritage (Pew Research Center, 2012)—a fact that surprises those who are accustomed to the disproportionately high levels of representation of white converts in American Buddhism. Aaron J. Lee, founder of the Angry Asian Buddhist blog, was one of the first young adult voices to boldly speak out against the historic and present-day erasure of Asian Americans from American Buddhism.⁵

As readers of *Be the Refuge* will know (spoiler alert), the book is, in many ways, a tribute to Aaron and a continuation of his legacy. When Aaron, who had become a dear friend, passed away in 2017 at the age of 34, I knew the first version of my book was no longer tenable. By that point, I had completed a yearlong residency in hospital chaplaincy, an experience that became the genesis for my second book, *one long listening: a memoir of grief, friendship, and spiritual care*. *Be the Refuge* was forged in the crucible of spiritual friendship, and I came to understand the book as—among other things—an act of spiritual care that could let other young adult Asian American Buddhists know that they are not alone, and that listening carefully to their (our!) stories and histories could open up a world of connections. As such, I hoped *Be the Refuge* could be taught in undergrad classes on religion and race.

AH: And it has been! What did you imagine the pedagogical implications of your book would be?

CH: Your invitation—which is still the best Twitter message I've ever received, by the way—to speak to your 10th graders surprised me. I didn't know if the book could resonate with high schoolers. Your students showed me it could!

I hoped *Be the Refuge* would be used in the classroom, but I never imagined that it could spark this bigger project in the real world. L2BB manifests my book's dream of "finding a group of young adult Asian American Buddhists off the page and in the flesh" (Han, 2021, p. 7) by centering Asian American Buddhists as a pan-ethnic, pan-Buddhist group—a group that matters both within this community and beyond it.

Three of our six students were of Asian heritage, another was Brazilian, and two others white. They all came from different religious backgrounds. None had extensive prior exposure to, or knowledge of, Buddhism. Yet in their attentive listening and thoughtful questions, our students modeled what it looks like to interact across categories of difference and grapple with the thorny real-life implications of power and privilege. Our students have illuminated the pedagogical potentials of *Be the Refuge* better than I ever could—indeed, they have embodied these potentials with creativity and care, thus becoming teachers to me. In this web of learning that we've co-created, each of us is simultaneously student and teacher, listener and listenee.

Andy, I'm curious what inspired you to investigate and experiment with your own teaching methods in The Workshop and L2BB? [p401]

AH: The Workshop grew from a sense among a group of teachers here that the aspirations we had for learning required a radical reimagining of what school was. We couldn't just tinker with

class time or co-teach on occasion: we needed to rethink the grammar of schooling and unlearn a lot of the ways we as teachers had been socialized to think about school.

I first encountered your book while I was in this process of wondering and reflecting and unlearning. I was also struck by the ways in which your book helped me see more clearly the significant gaps that I had in my own understanding (and teaching) of Buddhism.

Put simply, *Be the Refuge* inspired me to think more about local communities. Before L2BB, I simply did not know about the richness of the local Asian American Buddhist communities. As someone who taught Buddhism in Andover for twelve years before doing this project, that's significant—and humbling. My own academic training focused on Buddhist philosophy and classical Asian languages; I also spent time in Asia studying with Tibetan monastics. These experiences shaped me as a person, but they also overly narrowed my sense of what Buddhism was and who really counted as a Buddhist to Asian monastics in Asia and dense philosophical texts written in Tibetan or Sanskrit.

I did not have the conceptual understanding to recognize the erasure of Asian American Buddhism in my studies of Buddhism. As a result, I was unable even to notice the absence of Asian American Buddhists from broader conversations beyond the academy about Buddhism in America, a phenomenon that scholars like Funie Hsu have described powerfully. Hsu (2016) writes:

The exclusion of Asian and Asian American Buddhists from conversations on American Buddhism *is* cultural appropriation. It renders invisible our foundational role in establishing and maintaining Buddhism in America despite white supremacy. Thus, such erasure denies our right to claim our deep and specific connection—indeed, our centrality—to American Buddhism. (p. 26)

I can still recall the sting (and the upsurge of defensiveness!) I felt when reading Hsu's words for the first time. She names specific, white supremacist misunderstandings that distorted my understanding of American Buddhism to such an extent that I did not even wonder about Asian American Buddhists, much less know some of their stories.

CH: I've heard from white, Asian American, Black, and Latine Buddhists who have come to a similar realization about the distortions of media representations that center white convert meditators.

AH: Your book showed me that we could learn something profound about Buddhism by being in community with our neighbors—even if this meant forgoing the topics and texts I had previously thought were essential for teaching about Buddhism. Instead of locating Buddhism solely in ancient Buddhist texts [p402] or contemporary Buddhist celebrities (who tended to be either white men or global figures like the Dalai Lama), we could listen to and learn from local Buddhists. Co-designing L2BB with you enabled me to approach the study of Buddhism with a much more open mind (and with far fewer readings). We were able to avoid unwittingly perpetuating the “two Buddhisms” trope where “authentic” Buddhism was presented to the students as rooted solely in silent mindfulness practice, aspects of Buddhist doctrine like the Four Noble Truths, and rational inquiry (alongside the corresponding rejection of ritual and other so-called “cultural” aspects of the religion) (Quli, 2008).

As a result, when we visited the temples, the students did not enter these spaces by comparing their experience to what their readings said Buddhism “should be.” Instead, we took a bottom-up approach. We started with embodied, immersive learning, spent hours reflecting on these experiences as a group, and only then turned to scholarly literature to situate and deepen our understanding. This was our effort to embody the ideals outlined in Furlong’s (2018) definition of listening as an “artistic, civic, and interpretive practice that emerges from a place of wonder, curiosity, and *not knowing*” (p. 2).

For example, at Boston Buddha Vararam, a Thai temple in Bedford, Massachusetts, we started with a tour of the herb garden with Amy, a lay volunteer who told us about her effort to grow crops that would remind the monks of home. Amy welcomed us with warmth and spontaneous laughter, taking the students under her wing as she told us her own immigration story and introduced us to the temple and the monks there. Only later did we read about lay-monastic relations, gender in Buddhism, and the practice of generosity.

CH: I’m so glad you mentioned Amy, who was among the many teachers and guides we met at the temples. What were the pedagogical highlights of L2BB for you?

AH: Looking back at the term, I’m proudest of the ways in which the students learned to lean into their not-knowing and became better listeners and more skillful question-askers. On our very first day together, the students spoke honestly about the bluffing and intellectual posturing that can characterize class discussions. The new norm they collectively established—“Be comfortable saying ‘I don’t know’”—allowed them to be more vulnerable, to not-know with integrity. As one of our students, Loulou, put it during the end-of-term presentations: “We realized quickly that asking questions that were just vessels to slyly display our knowledge would just end in one-word answers or frustrate the people who were graciously working to overcome the language barrier between us. The purely selfless act of sharing information, food, and a safe space to ask questions is one that really touched me.”⁵ [p403]

As Loulou’s quote illustrates, the students learned to listen and ask questions in new ways. They also learned to better attune themselves to silences: what wasn’t being said, whose voices weren’t being represented.

CH: In *Be the Refuge*, I write about how I came to discover that “Asian American Buddhists are everywhere, even if we aren’t a trending topic” (Han, 2021, p. 253). This past August, I took a red-eye flight to New York for the first ever Bodhi Friends retreat, organized by a group of Asian American Buddhists in their twenties who had grown up attending the Buddhist Association of the United States (BAUS) summer camp at Chuang Yen Monastery in Carmel Hamlet, NY.

In our brief time together in Blakeslee, Pennsylvania from Friday evening to Sunday early afternoon, our Airbnb transformed into a Buddhist home. We created a collective altar, projected an image of the Chuang Yen Monastery’s Great Buddha Hall on the big screen TV above the altar, slowly circumambulated the grassy lawn of the house while reciting Guanyin’s name, practiced chanting and walking meditation and seated meditation, took turns cooking up delicious vegetarian meals, passed around a camera that produced enough Polaroids to transform the refrigerator into a photo gallery, and bowed in unison three times at the opening and closing of each peer-led workshop. On our last evening together, we gathered around a spontaneous bonfire and discussed the Asian American and Buddhist themes we observed in the film we’d

just watched, *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. Gatherings like these—organized by and for young adult Asian American Buddhists—are rare occasions, and joining the group in person gave me an exhilarating sense of what community life makes possible.

AH: You all looked so joyful in the photos you texted me after your workshop at the retreat.

CH: It was so much fun! In preparation for our workshop, which we playfully dubbed “Asian American Buddhists Everywhere All At Once,” my co-facilitator Andy Su⁷ and I prepared “Spiritual Sibling Portraits” with photos and short written descriptions of other initiatives by young adult Asian American Buddhists, including the Youth of Kampuchea Krom,⁸ the Young Buddhist Editorial,⁹ Chua Tuong Van Lowell’s youth group, BOCA Youth Group,¹⁰ and the Angry Asian Buddhist blog. We led retreatants in the “See, Think, Wonder” practice that had resonated so strongly with our L2BB high school students, then split them into four groups to apply the practice to the other Spiritual Sibling profiles. At the end of our session, each group shared their insights, connecting what they observed to their personal experiences as alumni of the BAUS summer camp. In further sessions over the weekend, we build upon these insights to explore our past memories of, present-day relationship with, and future aspirations for the “Buddhist multiverses” we have been / are / will be a part of. [p404]

AH: How do you see initiatives like the Bodhi Friends Retreat and L2BB aligning with efforts within the broader Buddhist community to bring considerations of race, lineage, appropriation, and equity to the fore?

CH: The Bodhi Friends retreat and L2BB are kindred in their embodiment engagement with issues of race, lineage, appropriation, and equity. I’ve talked with many Gen-Zers and millennials who are asking what it means to be Asian American Buddhists in a country where race is typically reduced to a black-white binary, and where Buddhism—if it is acknowledged at all—gets reduced to secular mindfulness as a tool for greater productivity. As Carolyn Chen notes in her recent book *Work Pray Code*: “To sell a Buddhist product in tech’s secular territories, [meditation instructors] must renounce meditation’s association with Buddhism”; in so doing, they bolster what Chen (2022) calls “Whitened Buddhism” (p. 162).

Asian American and other Buddhists of color are asking questions about the intersections of spirituality, race, queerness, lineage, environmentalism, cultural appropriation, and structural inequality not out of a sense of obligation, but because these issues are relevant to their daily lives. They are asking these questions together, in community, as they experiment with building different forms of refuge and kinship. All this is happening within a broader historical and structural context of white Christian dominance and supremacy, for as Khyati Joshi’s (2022) *White Christian Privilege* and Kathryn Gin Lum’s (2022) *Heathen* argue, American racial and religious hierarchies are inextricable.

It’s so important for us to listen to young people in these conversations, especially since they tend to hold less power in both religious and educational institutions. You remember, Andy, how numerous adults asked if the two of us wrote the script for the students’ final presentations, or if we made the L2BB website—the answers being no and no, of course. We underestimate what young people are capable of when we give them the leeway and support they need to create meaningful, relationship-deepening work.

Returning to your question, I'm reminded of a particular moment in one of the temples, when a monastic made a statement that struck me as homophobic. Up to that point, I had been helping with simultaneous translation for the students in our group who didn't understand the Asian language that was being used, but in this instance I froze and didn't render what was said into English. In my distress, I temporarily stopped listening to the person before me—someone who had taken several hours out of the day to host us and patiently answer our many questions. Unpacking this moment as a team in the days and weeks afterward, I learned that each of our team members reacted differently, with confusion, anger, disappointment, and so forth. I was particularly impressed by two students who told us that while they did not agree with our host's viewpoints, they had heard similar sentiments expressed in their own families, and sought to understand how this individual came to hold the particular beliefs they espoused. This was a powerful teaching moment for me: the students modeled for me [p405] what it looks like to extend the limits of our empathy when confronted with people whose worldviews clash with our own. It seems to me that equity is not possible without this ongoing practice of extending our empathy when we least want to do so.

As we gear up for our second year of L2BB, what lessons do you want to build upon, and what changes do you hope to incorporate this time around?

AH: The example you mention above has stayed with me as well. It speaks to the maturity of the students, of course, but I also think some of the pedagogical framing we put in place helped them make sense of that encounter. In preparation for the temple visits, we spent time each day working with a thinking routine from Harvard Project Zero known as “See, Think, Wonder.” As they grew more familiar with this way of engaging the world, the students deepened their ability to look—and sense—without critique when encountering something new. We spent significant time learning to describe what we saw and sensed. Only after doing that did we begin to infer, interpret, and evaluate.

This thinking routine enabled the students to listen and understand in more nuanced ways. In our follow-up discussions, they did not immediately judge this monastic and seek to end the conversation there. Instead, we sat with that person's words (and the emotions they evoked) and attended to them carefully. We had begun to learn to listen to the content of the person's words and to their life and broader context. We did not agree with this person's views on this particular topic, but there was a little more space in our own listening and learning, and the students were still able to acknowledge the many wise things this monastic had taught them.

This kind of listening and engagement with the world aligns with our aspirations for L2BB. We weren't going into these communities to help, or do community service, or tutor. We were going to listen and to learn, and to do so with an attitude of not-knowing. As the term progressed, the students understood their multifaceted interconnections with these Buddhist communities—a deeply Buddhist insight and vision of the world. This is a fundamentally different mindset than the implicit deficit framing that students and schools can have when they engage with neighboring communities. As Swalwell (2013) notes, when this kind of pedagogy is done well, students have the potential to “build dialogic relationships with marginalized people that develop over time” instead of “cultivat[ing] unilateral power relationships between them and others” (p. 112). Thus, this project offers the opportunity to imagine new modes of collaboration and relationship, something that is especially important for independent schools that aspire to be more than enclaves of wealth and exclusion: What would it mean to listen to our neighbors, to

take their lives and concerns seriously, and to see them as teachers and mentors—as opposed to seeing them solely as people who need our service?

I was heartened by the ways in which the work of the students resonated with broader publics, including local temple leaders and meditation practitioners, as well as high school and college educators in secular and Buddhist spaces. To me, next steps [p406] would involve deepening these relationships and working towards more sustained collaborations and co-authorship. In our context, I wonder how we might connect more fully to the inspiring work of Dr. Tham Tran, a lay leader at Chua Tuong Van Lowell whose research about ethnic identity formation among second-generation Vietnamese American immigrants helped our students significantly broaden their conception of what Buddhism was and what Buddhist spaces—like temples—could be (Tran & Bifuh-Ambe, 2021).

CH: How do you think this project can speak to the broader community of educators?

AH: There are a range of pedagogical implications here as well beyond the study of Buddhism. Our project helps to illustrate the ways in which basic aspects of the grammar of schooling—especially time, assessment, and the roles of student and teacher—need to be rethought to do this kind of listening-first pedagogy. At a basic level, we simply could not have visited these temple communities in rich and full ways if we were trying to cram our visits into one or two class periods. When this happens, Swalwell (2013) notes, trips of “short duration” run the risk of “encourag[ing] students to think of themselves as tourists rather than community members engaged in sustained efforts to build relationships over time” (p. 70). When we build deeper relationships, the students feel accountable to the people in the communities they have learned from; as a result, their public-facing assessments take on real importance. They are not just writing an essay that only their teacher will read; they are making their learning and thinking available to members of broader publics, both in local communities and in educational circles.

Thus, for me, the second major lesson of L2BB is the link between equity and a listening pedagogy. Of course we need to listen to people. But we also need to learn to listen to power: Who has it? Who does not? And how has it been deployed by institutions and individuals over our history to exclude and include? In *Teaching Community*, bell hooks (2003) argues that “many people supported inclusion only when diverse ways of knowing were taught as subordinate and inferior to the superior ways of knowing informed by Western metaphysical dualism and dominator culture” (p. 47). This limited sense of inclusion that hooks describes is not equitable or just. For me to create truly inclusive learning environments, I needed to listen anew and reflect on the incompleteness of my knowledge and its causes—the ways in which I had internalized certain practices and ways of knowing as “subordinate and inferior.” Doing this over time helped me attend better to the sounds and silences in the broader discourse about American Buddhism. I learned to more clearly perceive the ways in which white convert Buddhism (and white convert Buddhists) were overrepresented.

If our students had read contemporary scholarship on engaged Buddhism that favors certain modes of activism, they would never have come to appreciate the ways [p407] in which monastics at Lumbini Buddhist Temple in Lawrence, Massachusetts care for burn victims and offer free spiritual counseling to their local Dominican community. This profound, daily activity *is* engaged Buddhism, but we can only understand it as such if we expand our purview of American Buddhism.

In response to this disproportionately white version of Buddhism, I learned to ask questions—the same questions we hoped our students would come to ask. Whose voices are being overlooked, or erased entirely? How might I learn to attend wisely to these people and their stories? And how could I help design a learning environment where these stories and experiences were at the center of our inquiry, not at the margins? Our true task came into focus: How could we create a course on American Buddhism as it truly was—profoundly internally diverse, dependent on generations of Asian Americans—rather than the incomplete, white-centric portrait put forth by popular Buddhist magazines?

“White supremacy makes for terrible readers,” writes Elaine Castillo (2022, p. 13) in her essay collection *How to Read Now*. Castillo’s definition of reading is expansive, extending beyond how we read books to how we read the world—and how each of us is read and interpreted in the world. It’s a Freirean definition of reading (Freire 1987) that encompasses Furlonge’s (2018) “listening as an artistic, civic, and interpretive practice” (p. 2), and that has everything to do with embodied pedagogies. Castillo (2022) argues:

Bad reading isn’t a question of people undereducated in a more equitable and progressive understanding of what it means to be a person among other people. Most people are vastly *overeducated*: overeducated in white supremacy, in patriarchy, in heteronormativity. Most people are in fact highly advanced in their education in these economies, economies that say, very plainly, that cis straight white lives are inherently more valuable, interesting, and noble than the lives of everyone else; that they deserve to be set in stone, centered in every narrative. It’s not a question of bringing people out of their ignorance—if only someone had told me that *Filipinos were human, I wouldn’t have massacred all of them!*—but a question of bringing people out of their deliberately extensive education. (p. 5)

Our students did not describe their pedagogical journey in these precise words—after all, Castillo’s book only came out after they graduated—but they wrestled repeatedly with habits that undermined their love of learning: feigning knowledge in order to outdo their peers and impress their teachers, “grinding and dying” in order to get into a top college, narrowing their career choices to a handful of lucrative and prestigious professions. Castillo might argue that these habits are exactly what white supremacy and patriarchy would like to overeducate us into adopting.

L2BB—the 10-week course, and the literal act of listening to the Buddhists in our backyard—disrupted these habits. Our students began to experience the discomfort of unlearning as soon as they stepped outside of their elite boarding school environment and [p408] entered into spaces where their usual markers of prestige didn’t hold the same cultural cache, where their worth was not measured by academic achievement.

Early on in our temple visits, one of our students interrogated her own positionality as a young white woman visiting into majority-Asian communities and urged us all to confront the difficult questions of how our own privileges—racial, socioeconomic, educational, and so forth—might lead us to perpetuate harmful dynamics of appropriation or extraction, whether deliberately or unwittingly. How can we encourage others to learn from the Buddhists in their

backyards without turning their local temples into tourist sites? How can we practice relational accountability when only one of us is in the position to stay in the area long term?

L2BB inculcated in all of us a habit of asking difficult questions without rushing to facile answers. As co-teachers, we are now asking ourselves how we can work against “endors[ing] a model of scholarship in which the lives of cultural others constitute the legitimate objects of scholarly inquiry and to practice forms of research that distribute power upward, from those being studied to those doing the studying” (Bejarano et al., 2019). Our project falls short of the ideals of community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) or decolonial anthropology. Ideally, we would be co-writing this article with our students and members of the local temples we visited. Ideally, educational opportunities like L2BB that give people a chance to foster collaboration over winner-takes-all competition, to experience embodied pedagogies over disembodied learning models, would be much more widely available.

How to expand on L2BB in equitable and ethical ways? We turn to you, the readers of this article, and to other educators and researchers for guidance on this question. We are inspired by the groundbreaking work of Dr. Diana Eck, founder of the Pluralism Project at Harvard, who first taught her World Religions in New England class over 30 years ago, and by innovative undergraduate courses such as Daigenga Duor’s “Transnational Buddhism through Digital Mapping” at the University of California, Santa Barbara and Dr. Trent Walker’s “Buddhism in the Bay Area” at Stanford University, and by educators at Buddhist institutions such as Middle Way School (Saugerties, New York) and Maitripa University (Portland, Oregon).

We are fortunate to have a chance to expand on L2BB 2022 with a pilot version of this program for graduate students at the Klingenstein Center of Teachers College in January 2023, and with a new cohort of high school seniors in spring 2023. The graduate students have shared a range of rich reflections about belonging and school leadership, not-knowing in experiential education, and ways in which Buddhist ideas such as the transfer of merit can apply in schools and other nonprofit contexts. We hope to deepen our connection with other educators who are integrating place-based storytelling, mapping, and equity-informed collaborations with local religious communities into their curricula. Our ideals will no doubt outpace our capacities to realize them, but, to quote nonviolence and restorative justice trainer Kazu Haga (2020), “this is the work of generations, not of election cycles or five-year nonprofit strategic plans” (p. 158). Or, to borrow from Buddhism, this is the bodhisattva work of lifetimes and kalpas, working collectively to alleviate suffering and manifest more equitable futures. [p409]

To return for a moment to this lifetime, the two of us are humbled and grateful for all the causes and conditions that came together to make L2BB possible. The opportunity to learn how and why we learn, and to whom our learning is responsible too, has been a profoundly transformative experience. We have had to work against habit, to slow down when we’d rather rush or bluff our way through. The eight of us may not go into Buddhist Studies PhD programs or commit ourselves to lives of monasticism, but L2BB has already, without question, shaped our future trajectories. Our visits to Buddhist temples happened to coincide with the highly stressful week that students were hearing back from college admissions offices. Reflecting back on how the lessons from those eight days influenced her choice of where to enroll for her undergraduate studies, Lesley noted:

In the end, I chose a less highly ranked school, but one that is a better fit. I have the wisdom gained from the Buddhist temple visits to thank for guiding me away from how I

want others to perceive me and toward determining what I truly want to experience in the next four years of my life. (Tan, 2022)

On their own initiative, our students created www.listentolocalbuddhists.org, then asked for and incorporated extensive feedback to improve the website. They described the site as a “living archive” of their work, understanding that the project would continue to adapt and change in future years. They understand our efforts were more akin to tilling soil, generating compost, and planting seeds (incidentally, there was a literal gardening component to The Workshop) rather than to displaying a shiny trophy in a locked glass case.

We applied our students’ wise approach for this collaboratively written article, which began with the autoethnographic impulse to connect L2BB to wider pedagogical and ethical issues, and whose format remained a puzzle to us for quite some time: was this piece more akin to a book review, practitioner commentary, research brief, roundtable discussion, case study, reflection with youth voices? Mirroring the emergent and adaptive methods of L2BB—which we originally thought would be a project on “Buddhism in Boston”—we resisted the urge to signpost at the beginning of this paper: first you’ll read student quotes, then a section orienting you to this project, then a co-interview between the two of us that embodies the dialogical approach of L2BB, then this section on methods, and finally...

For an article about embodied, place-based, experiential learning, we can think of no better way to end than the following land and lineage acknowledgment, crafted by our students for their public-facing presentations at the end of spring term. Inspired by Plum Village’s Five Earth Touchings ceremony, which they first encountered at Chua Tuong Van Lowell, the spring 2022 L2BB students led us in a ritual that honors the lands, lineages, and teachers that have made our lives and our learning possible. It is a ritual that—like deep listening—invites us into more capacious and compassionate relationship: with ourselves, each other, and the worlds we inhabit. [p410]

Land and Lineage Acknowledgment

Inspired by the Five Earth Touchings Ceremony by Plum Village (2015)
crafted by the high school students of L2BB 2022

In gratitude, I bow to this land and all of the ancestors who made it available.

[bow/touch the earth]

I see that I am whole, protected, and nourished by this land and all of the living beings who have been here and made life easy and possible for me through all their efforts. I see all those who have made this country a refuge for people of so many origins. I see myself touching ancestors of Native American origin, particularly the Penacook Confederacy, Wabanaki Confederacy, and Wampanoag Peoples who have lived on this land for such a long time and know the ways to live in peace and harmony with nature, protecting the land and its inhabitants.

We invite you to reflect on the land you’re occupying and acknowledge your presence on it.

[breath] ~ 20 sec

We also want to acknowledge the lineage in our knowledge of Buddhism. From the oral traditions that shaped the early history of Buddhism to the local Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao, Thai, and Tibetan communities that maintain these traditions in the Merrimack Valley, these teachings have traveled a long way and passed through the hearts of countless individuals who have devoted parts of their lives to making this knowledge accessible.

We invite you to think about your own religious and spiritual lineage.

[breath] ~ 20 sec

We also want to reflect on those who have shaped us as students, including our parents and caregivers even before taking our first steps into a kindergarten classroom. We would like to acknowledge the mentors who have facilitated moments of processing, reflection, and growth throughout our most recent academic journey. We're here because of the endless generosity of our parents, caregivers, teachers, and educators, and as we graduate and move onto the next phase of our lifelong commitment to learning, we will continue to carry the lessons we've learned from our mentors, including a number of people in this room.

We invite you to remember the kindness of parents, mentors, teachers that have facilitated your learning and becoming.

[breath] ~ 20 sec

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NOTES

1. This blog post was written during the spring term of 2022 and published at a later date.
2. This quote describes Taylor's aspirations after completing L2BB and has been lightly edited for clarity.
3. Written on the whiteboard of the Tang Institute at Phillips Andover on March 24, 2022, the second day of the project.
4. The students wrote two temple profiles for the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, on the American Wisdom Association (般若寺) and Chùa Tường Vân Lowell. These are available at <https://pluralism.org/american-wisdom-association-%E8%88%AC%E8%8B%A5%E5%AF%BA> and <https://pluralism.org/ch%C3%B9a-t%C6%B0%E1%BB%9Dng-v%C3%A2n-lowell-0> (last updated May 5, 2022).
5. An archive of the blog can be found at <http://www.angryasianbuddhist.com/>.
6. Recordings of the students' final presentations are available at www.listentolocalbuddhists.org.
7. org.
8. A high school physics teacher whose dynamic voice can be found throughout *Be the*
9. *Refuge*.
10. <https://www.facebook.com/youthkhmerkrom/>
11. <https://www.youngbuddhisteditorial.com/>
12. <https://www.facebook.com/bocayg/>

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