Liberal Education in the Broad Buddhist Tradition: Visions and Seminal Texts[1]

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I joined Dharma Realm Buddhist University (DRBU) in Fall 2010 just as the university began to undergo a transformation. Aiming to expand its reach beyond a small community of monastic and lay students whom it had served since 1976, the leadership of DRBU and its parent organization initiated a campaign to redesign the university from the ground up. As we began the campaign, we found ourselves asking questions such as "What does a Buddhist college look like?" "What does a liberal education in the Buddhist tradition mean, and what is it for?"

After much collective critical reflection on these and other related questions, we worked to capture the main thrusts of our discussions in a reformulated mission statement for the university:

> [DRBU] is a community dedicated to liberal education in the broad Buddhist tradition—a tradition characterized by knowledge in the arts and sciences, self–cultivation, and the pursuit of wisdom. Its pedagogical aim is thus twofold: to convey knowledge and to activate an intrinsic wisdom possessed by all individuals. Developing this inherent capacity requires an orientation toward learning that is dialogical, interactive, probing, and deeply self–reflective. Such education makes one free in the deepest sense and opens the opportunity to pursue the highest goals of human existence.

This statement became the basis for all subsequent developments of DRBU. Today, DRBU offers two liberal education program: one masters-level and one bachelor-level. These two programs are based on an educational model similar to models used at a number of colleges loosely, and perhaps imprecisely, categorized as "Great Books Colleges." DRBU's programs have a sequentially built, all-required curriculum consisting of a collection of seminal classical texts from Europe, India, and China with a distinct emphasis on texts from the broad Buddhist tradition. Both programs also include a series of translation-oriented language tutorials in Classical Chinese and Sanskrit, and in the BA program we have added mathematics, natural science, and music tutorials.

At DRBU, we want our students to take on their own "pursuit of wisdom," even if, when they first start the journey, they might not be able to grasp or articulate what wisdom is and how to pursue it. The two curricula are virtually free of conventional textbooks or secondary criticisms and the discipline expertise that tends to come with those materials. Instead, our students'

[1] A small section of this paper was adapted from the 2013-2014 DRBU Catalog, which I co-drafted with several other members of the DRBU faculty.

reading lists consist of classical great works. To further encourage direct encounters with the texts, we also conduct our classes in a seminar style where discussion about the materials at hand is the main mode of instruction. To do this, we as professors eschew the role of authoritative expert in the classroom and act more as advanced learners. This shift in role away from a more conventional understanding of “college professor” also allows all of us an opportunity to learn something new outside of our fields and eventually become capable of leading classes across the curriculum.

DRBU further added an experiential component to the two programs that entails close reading of primary sources done in conjunction with a “laboratory” experience consisting of different contemplative exercises. This unique hermeneutical tool, where intellectual inquiry is informed and enhanced by contemplative practice, allows students to gain a fuller appreciation of classical texts as both philosophical treatises and dynamic methods of inquiry. This component is currently being tested with readings of Buddhist texts, though we are exploring the idea of adding this experiential components to other texts in our curriculum.

DRBU’s decision to adopt and adapt this educational model is a carefully-considered one that took much research as well as individual and group deliberation. This choice is a tribute to the foundation that St. John’s College has laid down and the quality of education it continues to offer today to its student. Crucially, we found a high degree of compatibility between this model and our vision of Buddhist liberal education. I want to use this opportunity to share several examples of seminal texts that help to shape that vision.

Interestingly, I find myself starting this discussion at the end--with the penultimate chapter of the Avatamsaka (or Flower Adornment) Sutra, perhaps the grandest of all Buddhist classics. The Gandavyuha chapter is an epic that tells the tale of the youth Sudhana’s spiritual quest. In this epic, Sudhana encounters the bodhisattva Manjushri and resolves to realize ultimate awakening (bodhisattvas are beings who have awakened to the nature of things and also assist others toward the same awakening). In the subsequent exchanges, Manjushri advices Sudhana that drawing near wise and good-knowing friends or teachers on the spiritual path serves as the beginning and the logical course toward perfect wisdom. These wise and good-knowing friends or teachers are referred to with the Sanskrit word “kalyanamitra”. This word is often translated as spiritual friend, noble friend, or good-knowing-and-wise friend. Although it is frequently used to designate a wise teacher who is more advanced along the path of learning (such as the Buddha), it has also been used to indicate wholesome and beneficial friendships among peers.

Heeding the advice, Sudhana takes Manjushri as his first wise teacher and asks him a series of questions related to how one can learn and perfect practices of a Bodhisattva: (again Bodhisattvas are beings who are themselves awakened and are assisting others toward awakening)

> How is a bodhisattva to study [cultivate, tend toward, maintain, purify, accomplish, follow, recollect, expand] Bodhisattva practices?[2]

Without responding to Sudhana's questions directly, Manjushri reiterates the importance of drawing near wise teachers. He then helps Sudhana refine his questions, and sends him to pose these questions to the next wise teacher. The same pattern is repeated fifty some odd times on Sudhana's journey: Sudhana poses the questions to a wise teacher or noble friend , he or she responds to Sudhana's questions, those responses lead to further questions, and the teacher or friend sends Sudhana to the next teacher or friend to pose the set of new or refined questions. Toward the end of the epic, Sudhana experiences an awakening during his encounter with the bodhisattva Maitreya. Maitreya informs Sudhana that his next kalyanamitra will again be his first: Manjushri, with whom he started his journey. Instead of refining or changing Sudhana's questions like the previous teachers did, he suggests that Sudhana returns to the initial questions he asked Manjushri during their first encounter. Maitreya also promises that Sudhana's journey will come to an end of sort and he will find out from Manjushri who his ultimate kalyanamitra is.

Next, as Sudhana travels to meet Manjushri, Manjushri extends his hand over a vast distance and rubs Sudhana's head. Then without entertaining the questions Sudhana had during their first encounter, Manjushri praises Sudhana for undertaking the journey, has a wordless exchange with Sudhana, and disappears. Sudhana, now awakened, ends his journey where he started--with Manjushri, the symbol of great wisdom. The bodhisattva also hints to Sudhana that ultimately, he is his own true kalyanamitra.

This epic highlights a key concept that underlies the founding vision of DRBU: that wisdom, even in its highest form, is inherent in all individuals and that therefore the pursuit of wisdom may ultimately be an internal one. Second, even though wisdom is inherent, it is latent in most individuals, and activating and drawing out wisdom requires efforts, perseverance, and guidance from wise teachers and noble friends. Third, Sudhana's journey from teacher to teacher is driven by his own resolve for awakening and questions about how he may get there; as he learns something new, he adjusts his questions with guidance from his wise teachers so he can inquire even more deeply. His journey therefore models a kind of learning that begins with curiosity and is sustained by questions. These concepts lend support to an educational vision that entrusts significant responsibility to the students for their own learning and fosters a trusting, supportive community of learners. DRBU's all-required curriculum, small cohort size, discussion-centered instruction, and the non-expert role that professors play are well-aligned to this educational vision.

The Gandavyuha epic points to the importance of wise teachers and noble friends in pursuit of wisdom, which presents a challenge. Although the community of learners that DRBU

[2] I like how Cleary phrases this set of questions in his translation (1178) and the set of verbs (study, cultivate, tend toward, etc.) from the BTTS translation (209).

faculty and students form may serve the functions of a peer kalyanamitra (or noble friends), the notion of a wise spiritual teacher (or dare I say, a guru) is not appropriate in a modern higher education context.

This leads us to the next Buddhist classics: the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*. The text begins with the Buddha informing his disciples that he will die shortly. In response to his disciples' questions on who will succeed him as their next wise teacher, the Buddha instructed his students to take as their next "teacher" not an individual, but "the teachings": the philosophy and practices leading to self-knowledge and a clear understanding of the nature of reality (Walshe 270). This vast body of knowledge, initially passed along as an oral tradition, gradually coalesced into a collection of works known as the *Dharma* and *Vinaya*—the Buddhist classics.

The use of two terms, *Dharma* and *Vinaya*, rather than the single term *philosophy,* highlights the central defining feature of these works: the dynamic fusion of theory and praxis. Because the "study of" and "doing of" philosophy mutually respond, the Buddhist classics were not intended merely as abstract doctrinal expositions of ready-made knowledge. Rather, they were meant to both inform and form, to explain and engage. Overall, they aim to stimulate an internal dialogue that encompasses the intellect, imagination, sensibility, and will, a process called "self-cultivation." The experiential component previously described is our attempt to implement this vision of "self-cultivation" in DRBU's programs.

The Buddha once compared these teachings in self-cultivation to a vast ocean: "...just as the ocean has a single taste—that of salt—in the same way, this Dhamma and Vinaya has a single taste: that of [liberation]." (Thanissaro, "Uposatha Sutta"; sec. 6) The text invites questions rather than dictate answers: How does each individual construct a world of meaning, and how can that world be transformed and deepened into a site of liberation? The freeing up and broadening of the human spirit to pursue such questions was the original intent of the Buddhist classics and the continuing purpose for studying them now.

The Buddha's final teaching is strongly suggestive of a curriculum consisting of classical primary texts and an approach to reading that is both critical and respectful. At DRBU we find the intent and purpose of freeing up and broadening the human spirit to be part and parcel of great works from different classical traditions. In fact, extending DRBU's curriculum to include primary texts from China and India's many textual traditions, as well as the classical legacy of Europe, can be understood as a richer and more meaningful process of broadening and liberating the human spirit.

Given the vastness of each of these classical traditions, selecting texts for the curricula of DRBU's 2-year masters and 4-year bachelor programs has been, and will continue to be the subject of healthy and active debate among members of the DRBU faculty. Given that DRBU's mission statement identifies wisdom as a high-level marker for DRBU's vision of

Buddhist liberal education, the topic of wisdom seems the most appropriate starting point for discussion on criteria for selecting texts.

Wisdom is a word many Western scholars use to translate the Sanskrit word *prajñā* (Pali: *paññā*), to distinguish it from knowledge and understanding that is limited to an object or a subject. It can be rendered loosely as "the act of knowing or understanding." Various classical texts have analogized *prajñā* to a "bright light" (Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha* 519), a "sharp knife" (Thanissaro, "Nandakovada Sutta"), and a "perfectly reflecting mirror" (Heng Sure and Verhoeven 74).

The perfect mirror analogy describes a refined state of wisdom where the mind reflects the objects of its consciousness free from distortion and retains no trace of them after they pass. The knife and the bright light analogies point to the aspect of wisdom as a tool or skill of inquiry and learning. These two aspects of wisdom form a virtuous cycle: through cultivation, wisdom grows in effectiveness as a tool on the path of learning and inquiry; the use of this tool leads to further penetration into the nature of things and ultimately leads to a liberated mind accompanied by "perfect-mirror" wisdom--the ability to truly "see things as they really are."

Classical commentary on the *Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta* labeled these two aspects of wisdom "conceptual right view" and "experiential right view" (Bodhi, "In the Buddha's Words" 303), where right view is an alternate term for wisdom. Conceptual right view refers to an intellectual command of the Buddha's teaching or philosophy through deep questioning, rigorous analysis, and precise and nuanced conceptual exercises. The capacity to assiduously apply conceptual right views clears and sets the stage for direct, unmediated insight, or ---experiential right view, ---to emerge from one's own experience. In a classic metaphor, the nature of things is like an object grasped or pointed to by the hand that is conceptual right view, and experiential right view are the eyes that behold the object.

In the section on right view of the *Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta* (Thanissaro, "Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta"), the elder Shariputra points to several structures a person can use to observe and analyze her experiences and make changes to her attitudes and actions. In traditional texts, these structures and several others are referred to as "soil of wisdom," and they are among the most well known conceptual tools and the most elemental building blocks used for constructing bigger, more complex edifices. The domains of the soil of wisdom include:

- The nature of human existence, consciousness, and the objective realm (the Four Noble Truth, the twelve links of dependent origination, the five aggregates, and the elements)
- The mechanisms of causality (the twelve links of origination)
- An individual's interaction and interconnection with others and the world around her (the six sense bases, the elements, the taints, and the nutriments).

Thorough and careful studying of these structures has been a standard part of training for generations of Buddhist learners, and a strong intellectual grasp and mastery of these structures is often considered to be a precursor, if not a prerequisite, to their penetration by experiential wisdom. The examination of soil of wisdom, which requires the application and development of intellectual skills and capacities, is thus well suited for the arena of higher education. Further, the different categories of the soil of wisdom--the nature of human existence, mechanisms of causality, and the relationship between self and the world--are recurring themes that can be found in many seminal and abiding works from different traditions. This is a useful criterion for selecting texts for the DRBU programs, namely, whether text provide important insights and stimulate significant questions or deep reflections about one or more of these themes.

So what is Buddhist liberal education for? The DRBU mission statement gives strong clues for answering this question, which is why I have use a big part of this paper discussing wisdom and its pursuit. I will end with two paragraphs from our catalog that were written to provide an overview of DRBU's programs:

> "The ultimate goal of such inquiry is to develop men and women who can stand on their own. By directly wrestling with the texts and, by extension, their own thoughts, feelings, and tendencies, they acquire a hard-won confidence and clarity that serves as a foundation for engaging life to its fullest. Amid all the conflicting desires and complex issues they will encounter, such individuals can undertake for themselves to discern, decide, and act upon what is true to themselves and responsible to others.
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> In this way, the goal of a liberally educated person is exercised and exemplified in vivo, all along and throughout their learning experience. We adhere to the dictum 'as you hope to arrive, so proceed.' If the goal is responsible, thoughtful, and creative citizens, then in their formative experience, students must learn how to take responsibility for their own development at every turn. The Buddhist view of a liberated and enlightened individual and the Western view of a liberally educated and responsible person clearly align on this goal. In both views, the individual is radically free and radically responsible."

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