

Challenges and Opportunities in Addressing Secular Themes in English Literature for Buddhist Monks

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Introduction

The teaching of English literature to Buddhist monks at the university level presents distinct challenges and opportunities for lecturers. Buddhist student monks, especially undergraduates who are deeply immersed in their religious and philosophical traditions, often approach secular subjects like English literature with perspectives that differ significantly from those of the general student population. English literature, rich with themes of existentialism, moral ambiguity, and cultural diversity, can both challenge and enrich the spiritual and intellectual lives of Buddhist student monks.

This research aims to explore the experiences of English literature lecturers teaching Buddhist monks at the university level, focusing on the challenges and opportunities within this unique context. The key research questions guiding this study are,

- How do lecturers address the potential conflicts between the secular themes in English literature and the religious beliefs of their monk students?
- In what ways do lecturers adapt their teaching methods to address the specific needs and learning styles of Buddhist monks?
- How can literature be used as a tool to broaden monk students' understanding of the world while maintaining respect for their religious values?

This framework clarifies the focus on both challenges and adaptations in teaching literature to monk students.

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Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing in-depth interviews with the lecturers, student feedback, and textual analysis to gain comprehensive insights into the experiences of English literature lecturers teaching Buddhist monks.

Interviews were conducted followed by a questionnaire survey with seven English literature lecturers who have experience teaching Buddhist monks at the university level, teaching in degree level, diploma and higher diploma courses at the respective universities they teach. The lecturers were selected based on their experience of teaching English literature to monks at various levels in state universities. The interviews aimed to explore their teaching experiences, the challenges they have encountered, and the strategies they have developed to address these challenges. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing lecturers to share detailed insights while guiding the conversation towards specific themes such as pedagogical approaches, student engagement, and the reconciliation of literary content with Buddhist values.

Feedback was collected from ten Buddhist monk students at the universities where the lecturers are employed, using questionnaires and focus group discussions. The aim was to understand their perspectives on the challenges of studying English literature, how they perceive the relevance of literary studies to their religious life, and their responses to the teaching methods used by their lecturers.

The study also involved analyzing the teaching materials, lesson plans, and literary texts selected by the lecturers. This analysis focused on how they chose texts that could comply with the monks' religious values while also challenging them to engage with diverse perspectives.

Results and Discussion

The findings of the current research reveal some complex challenges and opportunities for English literature lecturers teaching Buddhist monks. One of the most significant challenges identified by English literature lecturers is reconciling the often secular and sometimes conflicting themes of English literature with the religious beliefs of their monk students. Lecturers reported that while these themes are challenging, they also provide valuable opportunities to engage monk students in deep ethical and philosophical discussions, helping them to explore and understand these issues within the context of their own beliefs.

For example, students were asked to comment on their lecturers' methods of teaching stories from Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, such as "The Miller's Tale," which includes bawdy references and themes of lust and infidelity. These themes might conflict with Buddhist teachings on sexual conduct and ethical behavior. Buddhism emphasizes sexual ethics and moral restraint, so the portrayal of such behavior in a humorous context can be problematic. Similarly, when reflecting on Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, particularly quotations like, "Fish, I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends," and "You did not kill the fish only to keep alive and to sell for food; you killed him for pride and because you are a fisherman," students encountered themes of killing and moral ambiguity. These ideas contrast sharply with Buddhist principles of ethical conduct and non-violence, making the discussion of such works more challenging in the context of Buddhist ethics.

English literature lecturers found that the monks' background in Buddhist philosophy often led to rich, varied discussions of literary texts. For instance, when discussing William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, lecturers were able to draw on the monks' understanding of duality and non-duality, deepening their engagement with the text. This approach not only enriched the monks' understanding of literature but also allowed them to apply their religious teachings to broader human experiences, thereby expanding their understanding of the world.

The study found that lecturers often adapted their teaching methods to suit the unique needs of Buddhist monk students. For example, lecturers reported using more reflective and discussion-based teaching approaches, which align with the monks' training in meditation and contemplation. In teaching texts like "The Seven Ages of Man" by Shakespeare, "Death the Leveller" by James Shirley, and "The Old Man and the Sea" by Ernest Hemingway, which deal with themes of mortality, impermanence, and ego, lecturers encouraged monks to draw parallels between the characters' experiences and Buddhist concepts of death, mindfulness, and impermanence. This not only made the literature more accessible to the monks but also helped them to see the relevance of these secular texts to their own lives and practices.

The monks' engagement with English literature was generally positive, though it varied depending on the text and the teaching approach. Lecturers found that when they connected literary themes to Buddhist philosophy, monk students were more engaged and reflective in their discussions. However, lecturers also noted that some monks struggled with texts that presented ideas in direct conflict with Buddhist teachings. Despite these challenges, the study found that monk students benefited from the exposure to diverse perspectives, which broadened

their understanding of the world and deepened their critical thinking skills.

English literature lecturers reported that teaching Buddhist monks required a careful balance between respecting their religious commitments and encouraging them to engage fully with the literature. For instance, when teaching *Paths Untrodden* by Walt Whitman, lecturers had to navigate the delicate subject of sexual desire with sensitivity. Whitman's exploration of sensuality, as in his lines, "I will sing the body electric... / The body itself is a great poem," and "The mad pursuit of love that is not love but only the wild ecstasy of a single moment," presented a challenge. These themes of sensual and often forbidden pleasure had to be discussed thoughtfully, ensuring that the discussion remained respectful of Buddhist principles while also allowing students to engage with the full range of the text's exploration of desire and the human experience.

Lecturers viewed this balance as essential to helping monks develop a broader understanding of the world while maintaining their religious integrity.

Conclusion

Teaching English literature to Buddhist monks at the university level presents both significant challenges and valuable opportunities for lecturers. The need to reconcile secular literary themes with Buddhist teachings requires English Literature lecturers to be both sensitive and innovative in their approaches. However, this challenge also provides an opportunity to engage monks in deep ethical and philosophical discussions, enriching their understanding of both literature and their own beliefs.

The findings of this study suggest that the integration of Buddhist philosophy into literary analysis can greatly enhance the learning experience for monk students, making literature more accessible and relevant to their lives. Lecturers play a crucial role in guiding monks through this process, helping them to navigate the complexities of secular literature while maintaining their religious values. Future research could explore the long-term impact of these educational experiences on monk students, as well as the potential for broader applications of these teaching strategies in other contexts.

Keywords: Secular Themes, English Literature, Teaching Challenges, Buddhist Principles, Monastic Monks

References

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