

Book review of Sid Brown, *A Buddhist in the Classroom*. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2010).

A Buddhist in the Classroom
Sid Brown, 2008
State University of New York Press, Albany,
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A Buddhist in the Classroom by Sid Brown is not a curriculum of Buddhism, but a fascinating and touching work about the teaching profession. With personal experiences and Buddhist stories, Brown translates boring classroom life into humanistic, funny and delicious one. It is undoubtedly a highly recommended reading for teachers, principals, educators, and also anyone interested in teaching and learning.

With rich experiences in teaching many subjects, and conducting research in Sri Lanka, India, Japan, Thailand and the United States, Brown, who is a scholar of Buddhism, viewed teaching not as a job, but as a contemplative practice which can develop the minds of the students to identify our world's problems and ways of working to solve those problems. In her words, "Education is not about moralizing or coercion; it's about liberating and enabling students to work through the challenges of life, of the world" (p. ix). For instance, in the Introduction, Brown shows us how she practices this principle in a holistic way. Once, when she taught a course Buddhism and the Environment, she tried to encourage students to articulate their own values by paying attention to course design, including creating opportunities for class discussions and site visit experiences (Appendix 1: Nifty Assignment). In order to allow students to reflect on environmental ethics more deeply, she invited students to do experiments in daily life like refraining from buying, avoiding TV and the internet, and practicing meditation in a shopping mall. Nevertheless, when Brown was shocked by a challenging comment from a student, she reflected deeply on the dilemma between the roles of teacher and student in the class.

Besides the introduction, Brown organizes her work into nine chapters. In each chapter, there is a topic on pedagogical concern with powerful metaphors and inspiring quotes from Buddhist texts. For instance, in the first chapter *Lie Until It's True*, with her eating experiences when she stayed at a Sri Lanka island nunnery, Brown demonstrates why a teacher should pay attention fully to students and any teaching work. From the disputes about a monk leaving a container of clean water in a monastery bathroom at the time of the Buddha, in the chapter *Viewing Each Other with Kindly Eyes*, she explains how a teacher can help learning by building a supportive community in the class. In the chapter *Do not cross line*, the importance of cultivating the wonder of knowledge is introduced. In a practical way, guided imagery and creative mental exercises can help students to discover the powers and strengths of their minds. Brown also reminds teachers to beware the possible harmful wrong perceptions and envy of students, from the story of a notorious killer Angulimala in the Buddha's time in the chapter *Homicidal Tendencies*. Harm to each other can be avoided by practicing compassion, letting go students' mistakes and rejoicing in their success.

Under the education system nowadays, there are many ways of assessing teaching. From the role of teacher, Brown suggests that, "ultimately, in the discipline of teaching, there is no good teaching, there is no bad teaching, there is only teaching" (p. 109). Teaching is similar to meditation. During meditation practice, meditators don't assess the progress of meditation every moment. There is no good meditation. There is no bad meditation. There is only meditation. With the attitude of

abandoning any hope of fruition, meditators will finally receive the fruits in a natural way. With the same principle, teachers can develop an attitude of acceptance and openness to what is happening in the class--there is only teaching.

Throughout the book, Brown always shows us a vivid model of a reflective, devoted and spiritual teacher. She provides practical and creative pedagogical strategies by sharing her own successful and even failing experiences unreservedly. For example, once in a class, she was extremely angry with her students who did not read the suggested articles. With many reflections on her great emotions and expectations of students, she fully understands the importance of being mindful of the intentional thoughts, speech, and actions from the perspective of Buddhist psychology. “With loving-kindness sufficiently developed, anyone can use it to stop a rampaging elephant or, in any classroom, on any day, to teach” (p.61). In another case, she tried to cultivate students into caring for others by inviting the class to sign for a card in order to show care to a student whose sibling just passed away (p. 33). With the idea of teaching better, Brown even suggests that it is necessary to adjust her own lifestyle by practicing meditation, inviting students for lunch, and refusing some administrative work. At the end of the book, Brown attaches two appendices with nifty assignments and handouts. In Appendix I, an inspiring fieldwork assignment and a careful conversation exercise are designed for developing empathy and deep listening. Handouts about caring for students’ well-being like Sleep, Careful Reading, and Doing Well in College are included in Appendix II.

Although Brown raises many fascinating questions and issues, she does not always follow them through to the end. Pedagogical issues are not discussed systematically, while not all Buddhist stories are completely relevant to teaching experiences. Nevertheless, the central theme that underlies this book is apparent: teaching is a process that is inseparable from taking joy in the accomplishments of students. No matter how awkward, fragile and stiff the class is, as a teacher, Brown confirmed that her goal is to help students feel the joy of learning so that they develop a thirst for learning. In the Conclusions, she emphasized, “This thirst will get them far in life, allowing them to search for knowledge and respond to it in ways that make them and the world better” (p. 111).

This book will be of special interest to the readers of this journal, as one of its most explicit strengths is the breadth of interest in the heart of teaching. With insights from Buddhist texts and her own experiences, Brown outlines pedagogical strategies on significant teaching issues. Her writings are indicative of the concern and passion in listening to students and examining the art of teaching. Ultimately, this book provides illuminating insights to enhance future directions and policies in education, that is, the nurture of spirituality and well-being of future generations. I eagerly look forward to reading more of Brown’s work.

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