At the 20 May 2015 meeting of the HEAT Reading Group, Jenni Nowlan introduced the text “Pedagogy of Buddhism”, chapter 5 of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s book, *Touching feeling: affect, pedagogy, performativity*. The session raised a number of themes related to contemporary pedagogical practices.

1. One issue concerned the relationship between the two terms ‘pedagogy’ and ‘Buddhism’. Was Sedgwick, and in what senses, engaging with ‘pedagogy of Buddhism’?; or, rather, was she addressing the attempted pedagogisation of Buddhism, and what this might mean? In relation to the latter point, the pedagogisation of Buddhism, Jarow (2002) notes that,

“The Teaching of Buddhist traditions may itself be inherently problematic in this regard: after all, the historical Buddha is said to have balked at the idea of teaching.”
Another potential disjunction emerges, between ‘teaching’, understood perhaps as a set of practices developed around ‘instruction’, and ‘pedagogy’, understood perhaps as a body of literature or theory concerning how best to teach; to put aside for the time being the question of whether and how ‘teaching’ may be more than ‘instruction’.

Sedgwick (2003: 180) seems to suggest that the issue of the potential pedagogisation of Buddhism is of concern in her essay, when she concludes in her final sentence that,

“For at least some people … conceiving of the Buddhist teachings pedagogically has long offered a way to keep recognising their elusive ends in their skilfully intimate means.”

One argument might be that Buddhist teachings do not constitute an explicit pedagogy, if pedagogy is conceived in terms of a “disembodied pedagogy” (Jarow: 2002: 23) that forms part of the academic study of religion. Buddhist teachings are not propositional ‘teachings about’. They do not proceed simply by ‘pointing to’; or, rather, when they do engage the act of pointing they are highlighting what it means ‘to point’ and, depending on what is understood by the act of pointing, what is being pointed to, the act itself partaking in the constitution of the object and the constitution of the subject partaking in the reflexive constitution of the act of pointing-seeing.

Could it be said that learning, such as it takes place in Buddhism, if we are permitted to make such statements, does so through embodied inter-action and, in that sense, is open to the kind of performative understanding that Sedgwick evokes near the beginning of her essay when discussing, as illocutionary acts, a potential confusion between an act of ‘gift giving’ and an act of ‘teaching’. The notion of illocution focuses on the intention of the actor in performing a particular set of actions. In Sedgwick’s example, did the actor, in this case a cat, mean to give a gift to the respondent or to teach the addressee, in this case a human?
This brings to attention the distinction between illocution, focused on intention, and perlocution, focused on effect. In the above example, did the actor-addressor-cat mean to teach, while the respondent-addressee-human (mis-)understood that intention as to give a gift. [Aside: here it may be worth mentioning Greimas’s conception of ‘actant’, as the means by which an act is realised. An actant may be an animal, an inanimate object, an abstraction, an environment, an atmosphere, and so on, as much as a human actor, highlighting, first, that perlocution does not depend on reproducing illocution or intention in a humanist, psychologistic sense; and, second, that an act does not necessarily fulfil, as if mirroring, an intention.]

Do Buddhist teachings, in not being pedagogic in the above sense, i.e. disengaged, disembodied, propositional, teachings-about, exploit that potential disjunction between illocution (intention) and perlocution (reception)?

Buddhist teachings, Jarow suggests, are enacted and embodied, unlike most scholastic traditions which are heir to Cartesian discipline and humanistic disciplines which mimic the natural sciences in order to prove their value and which, in so doing, shun embodiment. In such academic study,

“Students learn about religious traditions in ways that favour detached observation over engagement, textual study over fieldwork and practicum, universals over particulars, and sitting over movement…” (Jarow, 2002: 23)

All of which practices go towards maintaining a division between mind, or intellect, and body, or practice. This division is reinforced by a principle of academic study, in religion and elsewhere, that upholds non-engagement as a pre-requisite to scholarly practice.

Might it be said that Buddhism, therefore, does not constitute a scholarly pedagogy or an academic pedagogy, in the senses outlined above? The shortcoming of a scholarly pedagogical approach to Buddhism, Jarow (2002: 23) proposes, is that “entire
areas of religious experience are rendered invisible or insignificant.”

2. A second issue might be seen to arise from the first and could be characterised in the following form: Is all pedagogy, in some sense, “near-miss pedagogy” (Sedgwick, 2002: 154) or “failed pedagogy” (Sedgwick, 2002: 168)?

Part of Sedgwick’s essay considers some appropriations or mis-appropriations of Buddhism, one such being the very scholarly approach to Buddhism itself, which turns Buddhism into an object of study, a process Sedgwick calls hypostatisation. Within this approach, the dominant scholarly topos, Sedgwick thinks, is that of ‘adaptation’. Adaptation places the emphasis on how an original is being altered, or othered, modified for a different use. Among the adaptations she considers, in a US setting, are self-help manuals, popularising Buddhist audiotapes, popularisations of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, popularisers of Zen Buddhism and the practices of the 19th century Transcendentalists. However, Sedgwick suggests that what she would like to do in this essay is try out some other resources from Buddhist phenomenologies of learning.

One such phenomenology is the mobility and mutability of the teacher-student relation. This re-opens the question of the performative quality of Buddhist teachings from a different angle. In this configuration, there is no original intention (that which is to be taught) and no unidirectional process of transmission (that which is to be learned), but only relationally itself, a joint or collective orientation towards learning, one from the other, one through the other, as one becomes the other, a situation which Sedgwick (2003: 160) describes in the following terms:

“In this world it is as though relation could only be pedagogical”

For Sedgwick, the Buddhist sutras form a series of dramatised scenes of instruction, all of whose multifarious actants, from
asuras, power-seeking deities related to the more benevolent devas, to yaksas, a broad class of, usually benevolent, nature-spirits, seek Dharma teachings.

The question is: is this an instance of “near-miss pedagogy” (Sedgwick, 2003: 154) or of “failed pedagogy” (Sedgwick, 2003: 168), a characterisation of the Buddhist sutras that is itself a pedagogisation of Buddhism? In other words, is it to bring Buddhist teachings in line with the disembodied pedagogy of the college classroom, which, as Jarow (2002: 24) notes, generally focuses on content and means of presenting content, for the effective transmission of that content.

Does this characterisation render insignificant and invisible, by generalising or universalising, the importance of “skilful means” or “skill in means” (upaya) adapted to particular circumstances (Jarow, 2002: 24)? Does it bring pedagogic relation, or intersubjective orientation towards learning, in line with Christian Bildung, i.e. in line with Protestantism, and the ways in which that Bildung, as a form subjective individualism, is incorporated into the contemporary university, aligned to that of ‘scientific objectivism’ (Wissenschaft) in the European, Humboldtian university, although, as we have noted elsewhere, not necessarily the English university?

Or, is Sedgwick, in portraying Buddhism in these terms, nevertheless employing “skilful means” or “skill in means” to adapt her message to the audience, the inhabitants of the college classroom? For Sedgwick (2003: 174), the Buddha’s own ‘skill in means’ always refers to pedagogical means. Yet, in terms of a performative understanding, they are passive and minimal, involving certain kinds of ‘opening’, for example ‘opening to’ a person or a predicament, ‘opening around’ a site of pain, or ‘lying open’, acts of compassion and ‘not knowing’ which, while having perlocutionary effect, are nonetheless close to practices of non-doing.

3. This moves us towards a third nexus of issues, concerning
what it is that we are doing and the question of means and ends. Upaya, a term from Mahayana Buddhism that can be translated as ‘expedient means’ or pedagogy, concerns guidance along Buddhist paths to liberation and enlightenment, wherein the motivations for conscious, voluntary action are questioned.

Sedgwick admits that her first, self-helping motive, a conscious voluntary action, for an engagement with English-language Buddhist literature was soteriological, a desire to be saved or delivered from a dire situation, prompted by her receiving a diagnosis of metastatic cancer. Nevertheless, her interest in the Buddhist literature of death and dying is also inextricably tied to an identification with the pedagogical passions and antinomies that pervade the Mahayana Buddhist traditions.

It is this double cord that further prompts her to put in question the “eerily thin Western phenomenology of “knowing”” (Sedgwick, 2003: 168) in which,

“To learn something is to cross a simple threshold; once you’ve learned it you know it; and then you will always know it until you forget it (or maybe repress it)” (Sedgwick, 2003: 167)

It is also, by the by, to put in question the relation between practice-based research, as committed engagement in a practice and the knowledge that arises therein, and conventional academic research, as dis-engaged, disembodied, objective observation and reporting, in the contemporary academy. Can such practices be ‘scholarly’, given the academic injunction to perform as impartial observer whose gaze is non-involved.

It is further to put in question the extent to which Buddhism and Christianity are soteriological, i.e. the extent to which they offer or promise salvation, itself a performative act, which may be illocutionary in character (the intention of the religious practice) or perlocutionary (the invention of the respondent, the one in need of salvation, which s/he presumes the religion to offer). It is yet
further to question whether Christian salvation, in whichever variant, can be equated to the telos of Buddhist liberation as ‘being towards death’, or being towards nothingness, emptiness, or ceasing to be re-born.

To end, and to prompt a new beginning, because we have not achieved liberation, in applying upaya or ‘skill in means’ to consider what constructs and animates our (academic?, scholarly?, pedagogic?, art?, design?) practice, socially and psychologically, perhaps we should contemplate and respond to the question that Jarow (2002: 25) poses, when considering the purposes of scholarship, pedagogy and liberal education:

“Who are the forces now being served in the academy?”

References

