

Lesson #3: American Transcendentalism and Buddhism: Cross-cultural relationships

“My supernatural powers and marvelous actions are seen in drawing of water and carrying wood.” Ch’an adage

Introduction:

Emerson and Thoreau, as well as Wordsworth, connect directly with Buddhist beliefs in their views of society, thoughts about enlightenment and Nirvana. There are also significant differences as well. The connections offer teachers excellent opportunities for cross-cultural relationships not only in examining poetry and prose but also in looking at depictions of nature in paintings by such American romantic painters as Durand, Bierstadt and Moran but also at depictions of nature on Chinese scrolls, available on line from the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Objectives:

- Understand American transcendentalism through readings of Emerson and Thoreau
- Connect those ideas to paintings by American artists of the time
- Connect those ideas to personal philosophy
- Connect American transcendentalism with Buddhism(questioning process, individualism, balance between inner and outer world, exchange between human spirit and nature) and to see differences

Methodology:

1. Selected readings from Wordsworth, Emerson—“Self Reliance”, “Nature”, “The Rhodora”, Thoreau-chapters from *Walden* and “Civil Disobedience”
2. Writing on a Thomas Moran painting to apply ideas of Emerson, Thoreau
3. E/T notebook: E-T as bodhisattvas
4. Handouts on Buddhism, videos to help present Buddhist perspectives
5. CMA websites for scrolls showing nature
6. Application of some of the CMA lesson plans to develop connections between Buddhism and American transcendentalism
7. Haiku as moments of epiphany, transcendence, enlightenment

The following selections, including William Wordsworth, set up ideas and attitudes of Romantic writers:

On society:

William Wordsworth:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon,
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers,
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.--Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan [suckled in a creed outworn: \(1\)](#)
So might I, standing on this pleasant [lea, \(2\)](#)
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of [Proteus \(3\)](#) rising from the sea;
Or hear old [Triton \(4\)](#) blow his wreathed horn.

Ralph Waldo Emerson:

From “Self Reliance”

“Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members.... To be great is to be misunderstood.”

From “The American Scholar”
“Public and private avarice make the air we breathe thick and fat.”

Henry David Thoreau

From *Walden*

“Still we live meanly like ants;...Our life is frittered away by detail.”

“Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! ..ruined by luxury and heedless expense...We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us.”

From “Resistance of Civil Government”

“The government...is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it. Witness the present Mexican war....”

“...we are all made at last to pay homage to and support our own meanness. After the first blush of sin, comes its indifference and from immoral it becomes, as it were, *unmoral*....”

How to respond:

Ralph Waldo Emerson

From “Nature”

1. Go into nature; be solitary.
2. Let the eye integrate all parts of nature; become like a child to allow illumination—adjust the inward and outward senses.
3. This leads to delight, exhilaration and the vanishing of “mean egotism”.
4. One becomes a “transparent eyeball...nothing...see(ing) all.
5. “I am part and particle of God.”
6. “The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common.”

Henry David Thoreau

From *Walden*

“...I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

Thoreau passes two years at Walden, which he condenses into one year in *Walden*, following the seasons. He dismantles, bleaches and rebuilds a house, gets to “know” beans as he sustains himself and describes the world around him as he gets to know himself.

Enlightenment:

William Wordsworth:

From “Tintern Abbey”

These beauteous forms,

Through a long absence, have not been to me

As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:

But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din

Of towns and cities, I have owed to them

In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,

Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;

And passing even into my purer mind,

With tranquil restoration:--feelings too 30

Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,

As have no slight or trivial influence

On that best portion of a good man's life,

His little, nameless, unremembered, acts

Of kindness and of love. Nor less, I trust,

To them I may have owed another gift,

Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,

In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world, 40
Is lightened:--that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,--
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

RWE= see above

HDT="I learned this, at least, by my experiment. That if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours...new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him..., and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings...."

The topics in bold raise key ideas of social criticism, response to materialism and opportunities for the sublime transcendence through nature and the engagement of one's mind and spirit.

Many paintings by American Romantic painters are available on line. For example, the painting by Thomas Moran, "Mount of the Holy Cross, depicts a scene in the Colorado Rockies. Students could discuss it orally or in writing in terms of the ideas of the writers above: "Nature reflects the spirit for those who open themselves to nature", nature as a teacher or guide, nature as a purifier, source of artistic inspiration and beauty. The painting asks viewers to be open in their perception and "build, therefore, your own world" (*Quotes are from Emerson.*) The excellent Lesson plans from the Cleveland Museum of Art on line would provide fine visual connections from Asian art with American art. See the bibliography below.

Emerson-Thoreau Notebook (ET Notebook) could ask students to choose quotes of personal value and

- explicate them--depending on the interest and ability of students
- write substantial personal responses to connect with selected quotations
- find art work to enhance and extend meaning

See the following bibliography for fine statements about Buddhism that could accompany the readings above. Selections would be made on the basis of time, reading ability, and student interest and engagement. Videos could also help interpret Buddhist beliefs and help students see connections with American transcendentalism.

Barrett, T.H. "Religious Traditions in Chinese Civilization: Buddhism and Taoism" in

Ropp, Paul, ed. *Heritage of China*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press. 1990.

This article contains an historical view of two major religions with an agenda for further study. He shows connections—rivalries as well syncretism between Buddhism and Taoism--as well as notes core beliefs of each.

Ebrey, Patricia Buckley, ed. *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*. (second ed.). New York: The Free Press, 1993.

Section 22: Buddhist Doctrines and Practices

Section 31: A Pilgrim's Visit to the Five Terraces Mountains

Both of these sections contain primary sources that high school students could read. Ebrey's introductions are very useful. Section 31 would be interesting for an American Literature class.

Gard, Richard A., ed. *Buddhism*. New York: George Braziller. 1962.

An attempt to synthesize and explain succinctly the beliefs, the monastic organization, the different strands of Buddhism interspersed with interesting translations of documents.

Higginson, William J. *The Haiku Handbook*. McGraw-Hill, New York, 1985.

Higginson writes: “Haiku work,..by giving us a moment to look at something, some event, and see it more clearly that we have perhaps seen it before.....Haiku not only gives us moments from the writer’s experience, but go on to give us moments of our own. The central act of haiku is letting an object or event touch us, and then sharing it....”

Latourette, Kenneth. *Introducing Buddhism*. Friendship Press: New York, 1956.

This is close to a pamphlet in format and somewhat densely written. The last section discusses the contrast between Buddhism and Christianity.

Netzley, Patricia D. *Buddhism*. San Diego, California: Lucent Books. n.d.

A book, for middle school or 9th graders, that outlines Buddhism: its history, practices and modern-day manifestations It’s a nice place to start.

Parrinder, Geoffrey. *Introduction to Asian Religions*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.

Readable and clear presentation of “main facts about the living and literary non-Christian religions, for those who have no previous knowledge....”

Teiser, Stephan. “The Spirits of Chinese Religion” in Lopez, Donald. *Religions of China In Practice*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 1996.

A discussion of the three major Chinese religions—beliefs, areas of syncretism, suggestions for new scholarship “bottom up” views and social structure rather than dynastic perceptions. The second part discusses “popular religion” in indicate what is also practiced beyond the three religions.

Thompson, Mel. *101 Key Ideas: Buddhism*. Chicago, Illinois: NTC/Contemporary Publishing,2000.

Helpful glossary of concepts arranged alphabetically from Abhidhamma to Zen.

Wright, Arthur. *Buddhism in Chinese History*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1959.

A series of lectures looking at the effect of religion in China and testing Toynbee’s thesis about religion providing a kind of glue between disintegrating cultures and their successor.

Cleveland Museum of Art- *Asian Odyssey*

<http://www.clevelandart.org/educef/asianodyssey/html/>

This is a marvelous collection of lesson plans integrated with works of art from the CMA. This covers topics from Clothing of the Buddha to elements of Taoism to Geography of China.

<http://newton.uor.edu/Departments&Programs/AsianStudiesDept/china-teach.html>

The Newton, Massachusetts, public schools has a very active program of Chinese studies. A very rewarding website with links to helpful sites including

<http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/bud/Simgmain.htm>

<http://www.bartleby.com/45/3/>

Primary source documents from Harvard Classics circa 1900.

Some possible videos:

Religions of the World: Buddhism

Joseph Campbell: Wisdom of the Past

State Standards

Concepts of Print, Comprehension Strategies and Self-Monitoring Strategies Standard

Students develop and learn to apply strategies that help them to comprehend and interpret informational and literary texts. Reading and learning to read are problem solving processes that require strategies for the reader to make sense of written language and remain engaged with texts. Beginners develop basic concepts about print (e.g., that print holds meaning) and how books work (e.g., text organization). As strategic readers, students learn to analyze and evaluate texts to demonstrate their understanding of text. Additionally, students learn to self-monitor their own comprehension by asking and answering questions about the text, self-correcting errors and assessing their own understanding. They apply these strategies effectively to assigned and self-selected texts read in and out of the classroom.

Informational, Technical and Persuasive Text Standard

Students gain information from reading for purposes of learning about a subject, doing a job, making decisions and accomplishing a task. Students need to apply the reading process to various types of informational texts, including essays, magazines, newspapers, textbooks, instruction manuals, consumer and workplace documents, reference materials, multimedia and electronic resources. They learn to attend to text features, such as titles, subtitles and visual aids, to make predictions and build text knowledge. They learn to read diagrams, charts, graphs, maps and displays in text as sources of additional information. Students use their knowledge of text structure to organize content information, analyze it and draw inferences from it. Strategic readers learn to recognize arguments, bias, stereotyping and propaganda in informational text sources.

- A. Analyze the features and structures of documents and critique them for their effectiveness.
- B. Identify and analyze examples of rhetorical devices and valid and invalid inferences.
- C. Critique the effectiveness and validity of arguments in text and whether they achieve the author's purpose.
- D. Synthesize the content from several sources on a single issue or written by a single author, clarifying ideas and connecting them to other sources and related topics.
- E. Analyze an author's implicit and explicit philosophical assumptions and beliefs about a subject.

Literary Text Standard

Students enhance their understanding of the human story by reading literary texts that represent a variety of authors, cultures and eras. They learn to apply the reading process to the various genres of literature, including fables, folk tales, short stories, novels, poetry and drama. They demonstrate their comprehension by describing and discussing the elements of literature (e.g., setting, character and plot), analyzing the author's use of language (e.g., word choice and figurative language), comparing and contrasting texts, inferring theme and meaning and responding to text in critical and creative ways. Strategic readers learn to explain, analyze and critique literary text to achieve deep understanding.

Writing Applications Standard

Students need to understand that various types of writing require different language, formatting and special vocabulary. Writing serves many purposes across the curriculum and takes various forms. Beginning writers learn about the various purposes of writing; they attempt and use a small range of familiar forms (e.g., letters). Developing writers are able to select text forms to suit purpose and audience. They can explain why some text forms are more suited to a purpose than others and begin to use content-specific vocabulary to achieve their communication goals. Proficient writers control effectively the language and structural features of a large repertoire of text forms. They deliberately choose vocabulary to enhance text and structure their writing according to audience and purpose.

Communications: Oral and Visual Standard

Students learn to communicate effectively through exposure to good models and opportunities for practice. By speaking, listening and providing and interpreting visual images, they learn to apply their communication skills in increasingly sophisticated ways. Students learn to deliver presentations that effectively convey information and persuade or entertain audiences. Proficient speakers control language and deliberately choose vocabulary to clarify points and adjust presentations according to audience and purpose.

Students develop an understanding of technology, its characteristics, scope, core concepts* and relationships between technologies and other fields.

Students learn that technology extends human potential by allowing people to do things more efficiently than they would otherwise be able to. Students learn that useful technological development is a product of human knowledge, creativity, invention, innovation, motivation and demand for new products and systems. They learn that the natural and human-made designed worlds are different, and that tools and materials are used to alter the environment. Students learn that the development of emerging technology is exponential, driven by history, design, commercialization, and shaped by creative/inventive thinking, economic factors and cultural influences.

Standard 5: Technology and Information Literacy

Students engage in information literacy strategies, use the Internet, technology tools and resources, and apply information-management skills to answer questions and expand knowledge.

Students become information-literate learners by utilizing a research process model. They recognize the need for information and define the problem, need or task. Students understand the structure of information systems and apply these concepts in acquiring and managing information. Using technology tools, a variety of resources are identified, accessed and evaluated. Relevant information is selected, analyzed and synthesized to generate a finished product. Students evaluate their information process and product.