The Authority of Women's 'Ordinary' Experience: Peggy Morgan and the Teaching of Buddhism in Schools

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Introduction: Personal Memories

I think that I first met Peggy at the South Coast Shap conference on Buddhism, in March 1985, organised by the Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education at what was then Bishop Otter College in Chichester. At the time I was teaching Religious Studies at St. Mary's RC Sixth-form College in Middlesbrough, including teaching Buddhism at A level and A/O level, and had just negotiated a summer term sabbatical back at Lancaster University to update my knowledge of Buddhism prior to attempting to write a textbook for A level, without any clue as to how such things were published. This was my first teaching post, after completing an MA in Religious Studies at Lancaster University in 1977, where I gained an interest in and love for what are now referred to as 'Dharmic' traditions, and was keen to share this with my students. After eight years of going it alone it was wonderful to discover Shap conferences, meet with others who were also doing similar things, and a happy coincidence that Shap conferences that year were dealing with Buddhism and Hinduism.

During the conference, Peter Connolly, Clive Erricker and Peggy organised a group to discuss creating much needed resources for the teaching of Buddhism in schools, which was at that time relatively neglected. As I was thinking about writing a textbook for A level but had no idea how to go about that I joined the group which decided to set up the Buddhism Resource Project. As well as Peggy, Clive and Peter, the group included Jo Backus, Joy Barrow, Anita Cotterall, Holly Connolly and Barbara Stretch, a mixture of teachers and lecturers, Buddhists and non-Buddhists. The Project met regularly at Peggy's house in North Oxford as well as at King Alfred's College and later in Bath College of HE from 1985 to the early 90s and encouraged and enabled the production of

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books and materials by members as well as replying to queries from teachers and supplying bibliographies and resource lists.

Buddhism must have been in the air in 1985 because both Resource (now the *Professional Reflection* section of *REtoday*) and the *British Journal of Religious Education* were planning special issues on the teaching of Buddhism, and Peggy and other members of the Buddhism Resource Project, contributed articles to both of these publications. By autumn 1986 I had published my first two articles, found part-time work at Bath College of Higher Education, and started to work on my first books, all thanks to Shap conferences, Peggy and the *Buddhism Resource Project,* Bob Jackson and Resource, and Heather Williamson at Bath CHE who decided to employ me to help with primary RE teacher training in spite of my secondary background. Others will be writing about Peggy's contribution to Shap, but I would like to concentrate on her dedication to the cause of teaching Buddhism in schools, and the personal support and hospitality she has provided over the decades to those of us who followed in her wake in this cause.

Peggy Morgan and the development of teaching of Buddhism in Schools

Peggy's contribution to the teaching of Buddhism in British schools cannot be over-estimated. Until the *Buddhism Resources Project* brought a few more of us together, Peggy was almost a lone voice arguing for, and providing ideas and resources for, the teaching of Buddhism in schools in the UK.

Before 1986 - Pioneering

In the early days of the development of multi-faith RE (from about 1969 to 1984), the traditions that featured most prominently in textbooks and syllabuses tended to be Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism, 'the famous five' (Morgan 1986b). There were a number of reasons for this. One of the main arguments for diversifying from Christian-based RE was the need to reflect and cater for the increasingly plural society of Britain in the 1970s. Buddhists in Britain however were somewhat fewer in number, and had less of a visible 'ethnic' presence, with many of those identified as Buddhists being converts (though there were, if you bothered to look, Buddhists with origins in Vietnam or Tibet or other Buddhist-majority countries). Few pupils were recognised as being Buddhist in most classrooms. Perhaps as a result of an interest from intellectuals and early scholarly concentration on Pali and Sanskrit texts, Buddhism had a reputation for being too philosophical and too difficult for school pupils, especially the primary age

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group and the under 16s. Buddhism's great cultural diversity was seen as too challenging. Some Buddhists actually argued against its inclusion in the curriculum, fearing misrepresentation and arguing that it could only be 'known' by personal experience and practice. It was hard to fit into the category of 'religion' modelled on Christianity, as it did not centre on 'God'. Many of these objections, and more, are discussed in Morgan (1986b). Even teachers who were in principle willing, complained that they themselves lacked knowledge and expertise, and that there were no teaching resources.

Trying to teach A level Buddhism in Middlesbrough in the late 70s, I too struggled with the 'resources' question. There was literally only a small handful of books available for pupils on Buddhism – in the 1970s I possessed three: two slim (but very good) booklets on *Buddhism* by Trevor Ling (1973), and *Zen and Modern Japanese Religion* by Michael Pye (1973) as well as David Naylor (1976). There was nothing at all aimed at the A level student.

Whether this was Peggy's first publication on the subject I'm not sure, but her 1979 article in the *Shap Mailing* was invaluable for teachers and made quite an impact. It is still referenced today, possibly in part because of its inspired title 'Buddhists have children too!' as well as its content. In this article Peggy argues forcefully that the inclusion of a tradition in the curriculum should not be solely based on the argument for the 'integration of minority communities'. Buddhism has had an important cultural impact on the Western world, and she quotes (while acknowledging its contestable nature) Ninian Smart's opinion that Buddhism 'has all the appearances of being the faith which will challenge Christianity most seriously in the West' (1971:692). She dismisses the 'too difficult' argument with the response that we do not start teaching Christianity to the youngest children by beginning with the most complex doctrinal formulations.

Peggy then gives three positive arguments for teaching Buddhism even to primary children. Buddhists themselves teach their tradition to their own children. The Buddha himself was a skilled teacher who knew how to adapt his teaching to the experience and understanding of his audience. Scholarship such as that of Gombrich (1971), Spiro (1970), Tambiah (1970) and others listed had already moved away from an earlier emphasis on texts only to study also what we would now call 'lived religion' (it really isn't that new an idea), context as well as text, practice as well as precept, the affective as well as the cognitive (thanks to Richard Gombrich for some of this phrasing), Buddhism for this life and not just for the monastic aiming at *nirvana*.

In addition to the arguments, Peggy provided ideas for topics with primary children and notably how to find some of the very few resources then available, and gives ideas for teaching using the life of the Buddha, Buddhist works of art, shrines, Jataka tales, impermanence and the wheel of life. Peggy wisely ends this article with the advice that

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'the important thing is to begin and once we have begun the floodgates of possibilities will open' (1979:27). Excellent advice for anyone. As my mother (another wise woman) used to say 'just get on with it!'. Peggy continued to contribute very useful articles to the annual *Shap Mailing* in the early 80s such as (1983) and (1985c).

Undated, but I think it was around 1982, Peggy characteristically contributed to the resource shortage by producing two books herself, which I for one used extensively with trainee teachers and even undergraduate Study of Religions students for decades, and still keep handy today. These are *Buddhist Stories* and *Buddhist Iconography*. When I say 'producing…herself' I must explain to younger readers that this meant typing them herself on an electric typewriter (*Buddhist Iconography* is 80 pages long), engaging her daughter Catharine to produce the beautifully executed illustrations (black and white line drawings meant that these were suitable to photocopy onto overhead projection transparencies), photocopying multiple copies and posting them out on request to interested teachers for the princely sums of £2 and £3. This did not enable her to give up the day job, which at that time was teaching at Westminster College (now part of Oxford Brookes). Peggy's enterprising attitude inspired the rest of the *Buddhism Resources Project.* Given the lack of resources the answer was obvious – 'we had to write our own' (Cush, 2018:64), and in the decade following our 1985 meeting, other project members joined Peggy in doing so, and eventually, by working together, also found commercial publishers for some of them, for example Connolly & Connolly (1992), Cush (1990, 1993, 1994), and Erricker (1995). Peggy of course continued to produce many more.

A phenomenon of British RE in the last few decades is the idea that there are six 'world religions', an idea which in its harder form solidified into the 'World Religions Paradigm' (see Owen, 2011), which scholars in both Religious Studies and Religious Education have been for some considerable time attempting to deconstruct. In the earlier days of multi-faith RE the list of possible traditions included in RE was much more fluid. A glance through editions of Resource or Shap Mailings through the 1970s and 1980s reveals articles and advice for teachers on for example Zoroastrianism, Bahá'ís, African traditional and other indigenous religions, newer movements such as Rastafari, and Marxism (and often something from Peggy on an aspect of Buddhism). The narrowing to six may be the result of a number of factors. The 1988 Education Reform Act (DES 1988) specified that Agreed Syllabuses must 'reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, whilst taking account of the principal religions represented in Great Britain' (Clause 8/3). The term 'principal religions' was usually interpreted as those with larger numbers of adherents, and thus ruling out smaller communities whether from ancient traditions such as Zoroastrians, or newer religious movements such as Rastafari, and depending on how narrowly the clause is interpreted,

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Humanism or other 'non-religious' worldviews. By the time of the 1994 Model Syllabuses (which decided against Humanism) the 'big six' were well established (SCAA 1994). The specifications of examination boards (now called 'awarding authorities') had mostly offered papers limited to the six traditions, and did not always even offer papers in all of these. The 1993 Shap Working Party publication (Erricker ed.1993) appears to be something of a transitional link, as it provides both 'perspectives of faith traditions' and 'using the traditions' perspectives in teaching' for the big six, while adding less comprehensive coverage of 'further perspectives' – which included Rastafari, Sikh diversity, indigenous Colombians, Bahá'í, Zoroastrians, Jains, Hindu-related new religious movements and New Age/alternative spirituality.

However, before the Big Six there was the Big Five, omitting Buddhism (see above). I always date the promotion of Buddhism into the Premier League as 1984, when a popular textbook for O level examinations at 16+ *Five Religions in the Twentieth Century* (Cole 1981) was re-issued as *Six Religions in the Twentieth Century* (Cole 1984) with the addition of sections on Buddhism by – of course – Peggy Morgan. This material was published separately for the convenience of teachers who wanted to supplement rather than replace their sets of textbooks (Morgan 1985a). One or two other useful books that (like Peggy's) have stood the test of time started to appear, such as *The Buddhist World* by Anne Bancroft (1984) who passed away at the time of writing (June 2020) at the age of 97.

The Spring 1985 issue of *Resource* included an article by Peggy (Morgan 1985b) which in two sides of A4 plus twenty footnotes manages to get to the heart of some crucial aspects to grasp when starting to 'get to grips with' Buddhism, expressed with a straightforward clarity and experiential knowledge of what teachers actually need. Even in such a short article the reader cannot miss Peggy's depth of academic scholarship, familiarity with 'lived religion' through personal encounters with Buddhists from various traditions, grasp of the importance of and extensive knowledge of art as an important way into understanding traditions in addition to written texts and awareness of all the existing resources for teachers and pupils of all ages. Re-reading this 35 years later, I did not really need the reminder of Peggy's ability to link all these together, but I was struck by how up-to-date it all sounded. This could easily have been written in 2020, with the metaphor of journey, the focus on a quest for happiness, a stress on the diversity of the Buddhist tradition while holding on to its distinctiveness, and most of all a brief but sufficient discussion of the contested nature and negative connotations of the word 'religion' which anticipated current debates taking place in both Religious Studies and RE (see for example two forthcoming/in press edited books: Harris 2020 and Biesta & Hannam 2020).

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1986-1999 – Persevering

After 1985, and the formation of the *Buddhist Resources Project*, Peggy's prediction of 'the floodgates of possibilities' for resources for teaching Buddhism began to come true, albeit something of a trickle rather than a flood to start with, and still often produced by Peggy herself. In 1986 issues of both *Resource* (Spring) and *British Journal of Religious Education* (Autumn) were dedicated to teaching Buddhism. Peggy, and other members of the Project such as Anita, Clive, Peter and Holly and myself contributed to both.

In *Resource*, Peggy's article was 'Buddhism in Primary Schools' (Morgan 1986a). She provides lots of ideas including a wealth of stories, explicitly or implicitly Buddhist, drawing on the growing range of resources available, whether from within Buddhist communities (like the children's magazine *Rainbows*), well known books like the *Very Hungry Caterpillar,* or those in her own *Buddhist Stories* (1982). There are festivals to celebrate such as *Wesak* or *Hanamatsuri*, and age-appropriate books about the lives of children in Sri Lanka, Nepal or Thailand. Work on the symbolism of rainbows or which things and people in our world we value most sounds very topical as I write in the middle of the Coronavirus crisis (June 2020), in a town festooned with children's rainbows and a newly discovered appreciation of 'key workers'.

The *British Journal of Religious Education* special issue was about teaching Buddhism in Secondary schools. Peggy's article (1986b) is an eloquent and well-argued case for the inclusion of Buddhism in the RE curriculum for any age or stage, at a time when most syllabuses and textbooks still dealt with the 'famous five' religions rather than the 'big six'. Rereading this 34 years later I found myself affirming every sentence. Many issues that the 'RE community' are still debating about are addressed here with an insight and the elegant but simple turn of phrase that I associate with Peggy. I felt like saying to us all (including myself) – stop writing endless new articles and just read what Peggy has already said in a manner both more profound and more accessible than some of our contemporary efforts. Peggy deals with criteria for curriculum choice; the question of what is meant by 'religion', including its negative associations in the public mind: what Linda Woodhead (2016:258) decades later has called its 'toxic brand'; the pros and cons of the replacement term 'spirituality'; the tendency for some teachers to promote a 'seemingly benign pluralism', suggesting for example that all religions believe in the same God; the frustration of teachers asked to 'cover' yet another item that doesn't fit so well into the current neat package, and the suggestion of also including Bahá'ís or Rastafari could all have been written today. Also sounding contemporary is her linking of aspects of Buddhism with issues of ecological concern, violence, tensions between religion and science, and the value of mindfulness, as well as with trust in the authority of her own

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experience. I particularly liked her contention in this article that 'if the contents of religious education are ever neatly packaged and tied up it is certainly a dead subject that is being dealt with' (1986b: 17).

Also in 1986, Peggy contributed the section on Buddhism and the Introduction as well as co-editing the volume *Ethical Issues in Six Religious Traditions*, aimed at the adult reader and thus very useful for teachers/lecturers or older students. This became a best-seller and a revised and expanded edition, still in print, was produced in 2007.

As the 80s continued, among Peggy's publications were two books for Batsford (Morgan 1987a, 1989) the second of which appears today in Amazon's 'top 100 books for children on Buddhism' and 'top 100 books for young adults on Buddhism' (there are now more than 100?!) as does 1985a. This is a testament to their enduring quality, 30+ years later. In the 80s, she enjoyed helping produce the useful wallcharts on Buddhist scriptures, festivals, and rites of passage in the series published by the Pictorial Charts Educational Trust, posters which I made much use of in my many years teaching primary RE to students in initial teacher training from the 80s onwards. There were also more very useful articles for teachers in various Shap publications, such as (1987b). The Shap back catalogue really deserves wider circulation.

The 1990s saw more publications on Buddhism for pupils of different ages by a wider range of authors begin to appear, including those by members of the Buddhism Resource Project mentioned above. Among Peggy's continuing output were two chapters in Jackson & Starkings (1990), further Shap publications such as (1991) and a chapter in Gates ed. (1996). Jackson and Starkings contains updated versions of 1985b and 1986a, and it is noticeable that even within the 4-5 years between 1985/6 and 1990, the list of books and teaching resources for pupils and teachers was already much longer. Peggy's article in the *Shap Yearbook* (1991) on the topic of story in Buddhism continues the work she started ten years previously in giving teachers access to a range of carefully chosen stories from a wide diversity of Buddhist traditions, including some interesting life stories of individual Buddhists from Ashoka onwards, notably including women: 'his and her stories' as Peggy titles this section.

Peggy's chapter in Gates ed. 1996 focuses on the experience of children brought up within Buddhist families. In this very useful chapter Peggy points out the particularity of lived religion 'generalisations must always be qualified by saying not only 'Theravada Buddhists', but 'Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhists', or even 'Sri Lankan Buddhists in this century'; and then they must be qualified again with 'Sri Lankan Buddhists from this village', 'this Sri Lankan family living in London' or 'one Sri Lankan Buddhist that I met.'(p. 115). She looks at children who attend viharas in the UK linked with 'ethnic' groups, for whom Buddhism is part of a package of culture, language, family history and identity

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'religion here is what you are born into' (p.116). The intra-religious education for children in Buddhist communities described by Peggy focuses on morality, behaving kindly and respectfully, 'to reinforce culture and social behaviour, not to challenge it', but also has space for young people to think for themselves. She talks of the warm relationships she has observed between monks, nuns and children in monasteries where the majority of the sangha are from Western backgrounds, and Buddhist children's range of opinions and arguments about topics such as vegetarianism and meat-eating. She includes material from Amaravati's magazine on the topic of animals, and collects some inspiring reflections on the importance of education from a variety of Buddhist voices. Peggy mentions the Dharma school project which led to the establishment of the only Buddhist-ethos independent primary school in the UK in Brighton (checking up on its current situation I find that it has been a casualty of the Coronavirus crisis – closing down in lockdown in March, the trustees have taken the decision that they will not be able to reopen, and will close for good July 2020 after 25 years). In this chapter Peggy mentions briefly some thoughts of Buddhist parents and children on school RE, and reasons why some Buddhists might be dissatisfied with education in community schools. The dissonance between the experience (or not) of Buddhism in school RE and the experience of Buddhist children with family origins in majority-Buddhist countries at home has been further explored 15 years later by Thanissaro (2011).

2000-2020 – Providing a Paradigm

Having provided so much to help teachers and pupils learn about Buddhism for over two decades, Peggy not only continued to do so into the new millennium, but as a role model inspired and assisted others to do so as she moved on to spend more time teaching at undergraduate and postgraduate level rather than in teacher education, and as Director of the Religious Experience Research Centre in Oxford and Lampeter. Her more recent publications on Buddhism tend to be aimed at a different academic level, on topics such as Jesus in Buddhism and Engaged Buddhism. However, never is Buddhism for children and young people forgotten, nor her colleagues taking up her baton and working in the same field. In 2008 she delivered a conference paper on 'Buddhism and Education' (2008) which she kindly made available to Jo Backus and myself when we were invited to write Backus and Cush (2008). As well as recounting the history of including the teaching of Buddhism in the English State-funded school system, our chapter contains the only (briefly summarised) published account of much more extensive research undertaken by Jo Backus with teachers and Buddhist practitioners on their diverse and contrasting approaches to teaching Buddhism. Resources listed then

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included online sources in addition to the ever-growing list of books for pupils and teachers. Peggy's paper was extremely useful in confirming, correcting or adding to our account.

The fact that Peggy's work in this field was still needed as we entered the new millennium is illustrated by Dossett (2000) who was still having to argue for the inclusion of Buddhism as 'Buddhism is often the last religion any teacher may wish to tackle' (200:320). But the collection of books and resources had improved, with a longer list than in earlier decades. In the last 20 years there have been many more added, including by Wendy herself (2003 reprinted 2016). I was about to list more of these but my bibliography would have become too long, and resources are easier to track down these days. However, even in the last decade, Buddhism is still relatively neglected, except perhaps at A level where it remains somewhat popular, though only relatively so, and nowhere near 'Philosophy and Ethics'. As one crude example, I counted the numbers of 'mentions' various traditions gained in the exemplar material for pupils aged 5-14 in the 2013 *National Curriculum Framework for Religious Education* (REC 2013). The scores are: Christianity 26, Islam 16, Judaism 15, Hinduism 13, Humanism 7, Buddhism 5, Sikhism 4, Jains/Zoroastrians/Bahá'í 2 each, Jehovah's Witnesses and Latter-Day Saints 1 each, Pagans 0. So, Buddhism can still be relatively neglected, though not as much and with less excuse than 40,30, 20 or 10 years ago.

The Importance of Experience as a source of Authority, especially Women's Experience

Peggy is not just a role model in the world of Buddhism and Education, she is also a role model for women more generally in Religious Studies and Religious Education. She manages to combine the depth of scholarship that enables her to teach and examine Religious Studies at Oxford University, be Academic Advisor to the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies and be President of the British Association for the Study of Religion (2000-2003), with the practical skills, sensitivity and experience that enable her to find wonderful ways of sharing religious traditions and interesting questions with the smallest of children. Peggy is able to combine knowledge of text and context, precept and practice, the cognitive and the affective. She knows the scholarly material but has also met and talked to many Buddhists, from many different traditions.

An important element here is the experience of women. When reviewing my own disparate publications in 2012, I realised that 'experience' was a word I used a lot – the centrality of religious experience, the experience of classroom teachers, the experience of

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women within religious traditions, the ordinary everyday life experience of women. Others will be writing about Peggy's contribution to the study of 'Religious Experience' with the Religious Experience Research Centre and elsewhere, but I would like to stress the importance not of visions, numinous encounters or mystical moments, but the 'ordinary' experience of women's lives. It was a male colleague specialising in Goddess thealogy (men can be feminists too) who gave me the phrase 'women's experience is a source of authority' (see Reid-Bowen, 2007:44-45). This is particularly important to hold on to in relation to religious institutions, where the other sources of authority – foundational texts and teachers, classical scholars, current spokespersons - tend to be overwhelmingly male. Where the experience of women (and children) is at odds with the authorised version, maybe it is worth listening. Peggy is an inspiring example of a woman not afraid to trust the authority of their own experience, nor to speak out about it.

I will never forget (but I now forget where and when exactly, probably a Shap conference) I heard Peggy talking about the Goddess and goddesses in the Hindu tradition, comparing sweet, gentle, Parvati in the company of her husband Shiva and child Ganesh with the powerful and rather scary Kali or Durga *when on her own and being herself.* I have always admired the two sides of the Goddess in Peggy: gentle, compassionate, hospitable and ladylike, beautifully dressed (we admire each other's sense of style) but fierce and strong when necessary, to continue the struggles that need continuing.

Conclusion

Re-reading Peggy's work in the area of Buddhism and education, I have both been reminded of just how much she contributed, and impressed by just how up-to-date much of her writing even from 35-40 years ago sounds. This article was written under lockdown conditions, reliant on only those publications I had somewhere in the house (quite a few once I unearthed them), so I apologise to Peggy if I have omitted something important. I had just finished writing a short piece on 'Should Buddhism be taught in schools?' (2020) before embarking on my Morgan retrospective and really, we could just have republished one of Peggy's articles from the 1980s.

In many Dharmic traditions, the authenticity of your teaching is established by reference to your lineage of teachers – your guru or lama. I like to think that I am one of Peggy's many disciples, attempting to carry on her approach to teaching Buddhism in schools, and learning to trust in the authority of women's 'ordinary' experience.

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