

After
**Religious
Education**

Applying the After RE Framework

**What happened to
Buddhism as it spread?**

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Where is this learning happening and who is creating the learning?

The context of the school, pupils, and teachers

This example has been planned and taught in a mixed, fully comprehensive 11-18 school of over 1500 students situated in East London. The school has between fifty and sixty feeder primary schools and over thirty feeder secondary schools into the Sixth Form. Religious Education is taught across all key stages by five specialist teachers of RE with varying academic backgrounds including Theology, Philosophy, and Biblical Studies. The examples were chosen by teachers who are respected as professionals and seen as creators of curriculum knowledge. The nature of the school means that the curriculum is approved by the governors (rather than set by a locally agreed syllabus or other syllabus) which gives the teachers flexibility and agency.

Where is this example situated?

Context of the learning – the pupils and their previous learning

This example is taken from a unit of work taught in the autumn term of Year 9 (students who are thirteen or fourteen years old). This learning follows a focus on the philosophy of Buddhism and the story of Siddhartha Gautama.

The After RE framework employs Klafki's 5 questions for didactic analysis (2000). The second and third questions are particularly relevant here in understanding the context of the learning for the students.

1. How do the students understand it at this point?
2. What might it mean for those students in the future?

The students have already engaged with some Buddhist philosophy in considering the cause of human suffering, the nature of impermanence, and rebirth. They have learnt how some Buddhists understand these concepts and have been invited to respond personally to these ideas. The learning in these examples particularly resonates with the students because the learning involves contradictions with what they have learnt previously in this unit. This contradiction acts as a hook to the learning as students are challenged by ideas like the presence of gods or deities and the idea of a permanent self that is reborn.

What do we want the example to do?

Aims and learning outcomes

The example is picked to help students understand change in religion, diversity within religious traditions, the hybridity of religion (including belief and practice), and the cultural influences on religion and vice versa. Our aim is that students begin to understand how interactions between belief traditions and culture lead to diversity, contradictions, and exceptions. The examples show the complexity of identity in a current lived reality. The example helps students to understand how the Buddhist belief in impermanence is expressed in the evolution of the tradition. The examples are approached in a multi-disciplinary way with those approaches guided by each example. The idea that religion is unchanging and static is challenged and the role of leaders and authorities is explored. The power of believers to affect change in traditions is also introduced.

How does this example illustrate the principles?

The context above shows that the principles of the After RE project are illustrated by the development and selection of the example here and the example itself. The teachers developing the example had **agency** and were supported in their role as curriculum makers. The **judgement** of the teachers was trusted in selecting the examples and developing the learning materials. The use of the example is a good case study of **exemplarity** in RE teaching. The students experienced the examples as sites of learning where their developing **judgement** about possible influences was valued and fostered. The examples show that religion is dynamic, hybrid, and diverse and this is something we hope resonates with the students' own experience of religion, religious belief, and culture. The explanation of why these particular examples have been chosen is made explicit in the learning and this shows students that subject matter is contextual and perspectival (**interpretability**). The selected examples show diversity within a religious tradition and show how knowledge is formed and developed through contact and exchange. The examples also engage in how power works in religious traditions. In all of these ways the particular learning experience could be said to take a **decolonising** approach.

What are the next steps in the learning?

The examples here of Buddhism in Tibet and Japan are followed by a study of Buddhism in the UK through the examples of Thai Buddhism and Triratna Buddhism in the UK. Briefly, these examples aim to explore what attracts some people to religious traditions seemingly deeply embedded in a different cultural context, while others are attracted to religion which might claim to have removed historic cultural influences (while of course being deeply influenced by their own cultural milieu).

The example(s): What happened to Buddhism as it spread?

The students are introduced to Tibet and then to a small number of distinguishing features of Tibetan Buddhism. These distinguishing features are:

- The tradition of the 'incarnate lama' where a deceased lama can reappear in the new body of a child e.g. the centuries-long tradition by which the Dalai Lama is identified.
- a range of gods that act as symbolic representations of Enlightenment e.g. Tangka and other gods that are seen as needing to be 'controlled' by rituals and Buddhist practices.
- the presence of pre-Buddhism religious traditions e.g. Bon continue to exist, sometimes as part of Buddhism, and are often concerned with day to day life e.g. protection, good harvests...

The students then consider a range of possible cultural influences on Buddhism as it arrived in Tibet between the 8th and 12th centuries. The students are taught a little about the Bon religion of Tibet. And then some connections are made:

- The belief in past and future lives by the Bon religion that was present in Tibet when Buddhism arrived.
- The presence of gods in the Bon religion. When Buddhism arrived in Tibet it is believed by some that these gods were converted to Buddhism and incorporated into ritual and practice.



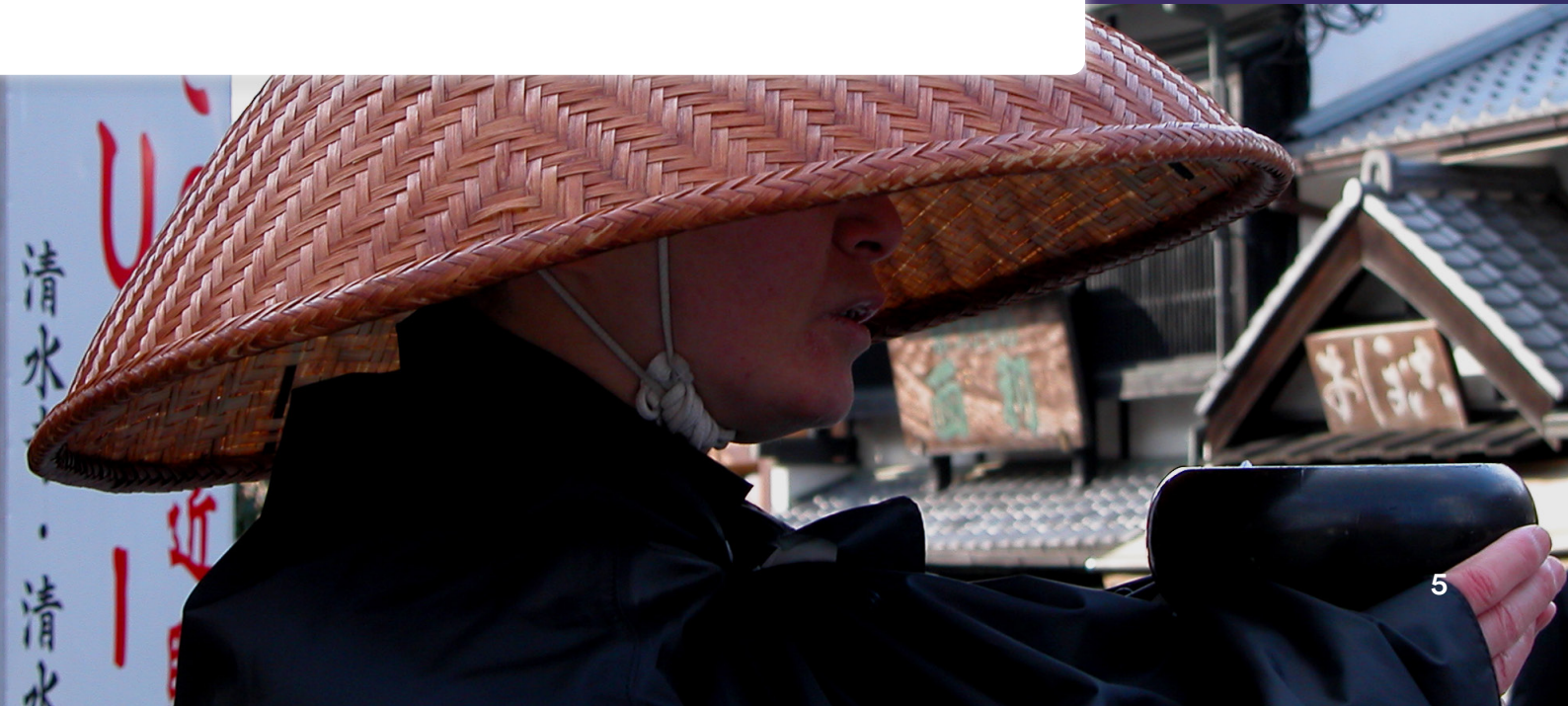
The students are then introduced to a contrasting example; Japan and Zen Buddhism. The above pattern of learning is repeated with students first encountering some of the distinguishing features of Zen Buddhism:

- The presence of Shinto kami (deity) seen as manifestations of Buddhist divinities.
- Buddhist temples were built alongside Shinto temples and people would often visit both.
- The use of koans (unsolvable riddles) to help guide Buddhists towards Enlightenment.
- The importance of education in Zen Buddhism and monasteries as educational centres.

The students then consider a range of possible cultural influences on Buddhism as it arrived in Japan from the 6th Century:

- The pre-existing Shinto, shamanism, and mountain worship religious traditions are all thought to have influenced Buddhism as it arrived in Japan. Some scholars have suggested that the success of Buddhism in Japan owed much to its tolerance and absorption of these different traditions.
- The use of koans is thought to be influenced by many different traditions of East Asian literary games.
- The belief that all can benefit from education is thought to have come from Confucianism religion/philosophy as Buddhism came to Japan via China.

When these examples are presented it is made clear that these are only some distinguishing features of the traditions studied and only some possible influences on them. The students are also made aware that Tibetan and Zen Buddhism are each diverse and that other Buddhist traditions also exist alongside them in each country.



The early Buddhist rules for monks taught that when Buddhism moved it should consider the times, the society, the culture and customs of the region in which Buddhism was being practiced.

If a Buddhist teaching is not considered pure and correct in light of local customs, then one should not adopt them. The Buddha in The Fivefold Rules of Discipline.

The learning done through these examples is then linked to a range of Buddhist teachings, concepts, and quotes. Some of these teachings are being revisited, while others are new. The students use these ideas to answer the question ‘Why was Buddhism able to adapt and incorporate aspects of the countries it arrived in?’ Some of the Buddhist teachings, concepts, and quotes are:



All conditioned phenomena are impermanent

Buddha, Dhammapada (277)



All sects [religions] deserve reverence for one reason or another. By thus acting, a man exalts his own sect and at the same time does service to the sects of other people.

Emperor Asoka, early Buddhist leader



When we scrutinize the sutras and treatises [teachings] with care, we find that there is a teaching about a precept known as following the customs of the region... The meaning of this precept is that, so long as no seriously offensive act is involved, then even if one were to depart to some slight degree from the teachings of Buddhism, it would be better to avoid going against the manners and customs of the country. It appears that some wise men who are unaware of this point express extreme views...

Nichiren Daishonin (1222 – 1283)



A person of wisdom is not one who practices Buddhism apart from worldly affairs.

Nichiren Daishonin (1222 – 1283)



The idea in Japan of “honji-suijaku” which literally means ‘original forms of deities and their local traces’ taught that local gods (kami) could represent universal Buddhist divinities and aspects of Buddhist belief.

Evaluation

Pedagogical reduction

As with all teaching there is pedagogical reduction here. The examples used here:

- focus on 'monastic' expressions of Buddhism
- are limited to only Tibet and Japan
- only explore limited influences (role of Bon/Shinto, place of education in societies, existing beliefs in reincarnation, local religious practices)
- focus only on historic development of traditions

But it can be argued that in this pedagogical reduction there can be pedagogical depth. The examples open up an understanding of religion and religious traditions that go beyond the particular examples chosen.

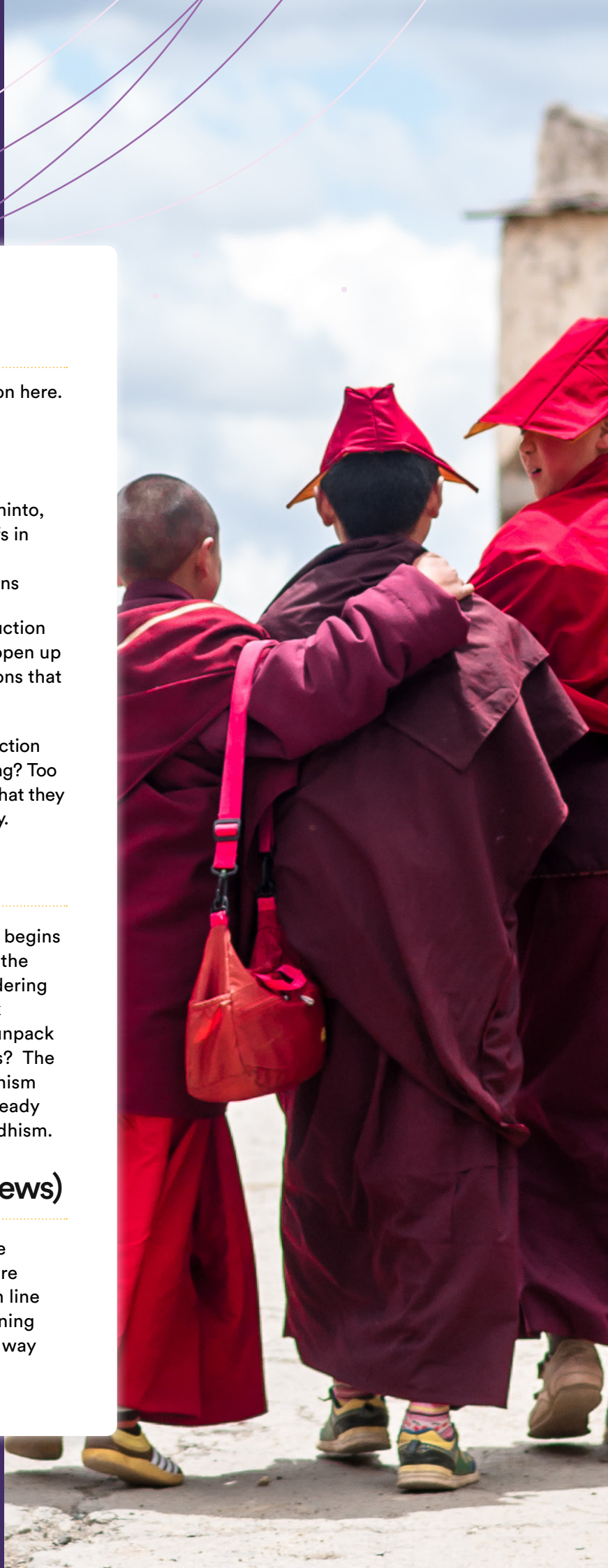
Is the pedagogical reduction/grammatization/reduction of the traditions appropriate for this level of learning? Too much, not enough? An analysis reminds teachers that they can, and must, employ their professional autonomy.

Sequencing

Although the unit where this example is situated begins with a focus on the philosophy of Buddhism and the story of Siddhartha Gautama, we are now considering other ways into the unit. It is interesting to think about when it is appropriate to complicate and unpack learning. What is an appropriate stage to do this? The distinguishing features of Tibetan and Zen Buddhism might be less distinguishing if students didn't already have some background in the philosophy of Buddhism.

Religion and religions (worldviews)

In light of recent developments in RE it should be noted that this teaching addresses both the nature of religion and particular religions. This is also in line with principles of the After RE project. This learning addresses these particular aspects in a cohesive way rather than separating these strands out.





Planning paralysis

The principles of the After RE project are very useful to help free teachers from selection and representation paralysis. The examples chosen here are exactly that examples. They are not meant to be representative of whole traditions indeed they are picked to highlight diversity and distinctiveness. This focus on exemplarity is freeing for teachers. It is a useful reminder that examples are not sacred and that the example is a vehicle through which to open up learning and deliver bigger aims.

Case studies and learning

What can we learn from other subjects who make use of case study approaches to teaching? How do they go about selecting case studies? How do students understand the use of case studies in these other subject areas?