My Dilettante Enlightenment

by Zachary Bos

The lotus position

is supposed to cultivate inner peace and tranquility. This seemed strange to me as my inflexible legs protested with mild cramps. But, though the body was reluctant, my spirit was willing! As I sat on a plump cushion on the floor at the Greater Boston Buddhist and Cultural Center (GBBCC), I looked forward to getting a Buddhist perspective on spirituality. I am not sure if I came any closer to nirvana, but once I transcended my shin splints I was able to enjoy a phenomenal evening of music, food, and meditation.

On November 5th, I was part of a delegation of 50 students invited to the GBBCC by its abbot, the Venerable YiFa. Accompanied by professors David Eckel and David Cunningham and Core staff member Suzyn-Elayne Soler, we were eager to take advantage of a special introduction to Buddhist culture. The Center is located on Massachusetts Ave at the midpoint between Central and Harvard T stations. Founded in 1999, it is a branch of Fo Guang Shan (Mt. Buddha's Light) Monastery in Taiwan. YiFa began by answering questions about her life as a Buddhist nun for 23 years. She anticipated a possible reason why young women might hesitate to enter the clergy: “Society expects women to have long feminine hair, so women may feel strange about shaving their heads, but we do not require them to . . . even though I shave my own!”

After removing our shoes we entered the temple. Three large golden Buddha statues are seated in gilded niches on the main wall of the room, surrounded by smaller figurines and religious objects. To the right is the Medicine Buddha, who protects living beings, and to the left is the Buddha for After Death. Founder Buddha is in the lotus position today, I read my horoscope. More correctly, I should say I read several horoscopes. The advice seems sound, but at the same time confusing. One, by “noted astrologer” Michael Thiessen, urges me that “today is a great day to spend with my family.” Another by Eugena Last insists that I “socialize with friends and peers.” I suppose I’ll have to see my friends and peers before dinner and my family after. Still another (www.astrocenter.com) states in full: “Your attitude towards others pushes you to meet people, who could be considered by a large majority, as eccentric persons. They might be considered by a large majority to be a little bit strange. You will be happy to meet one of them today, but this person will look familiar and strangely enough, will most likely be yourself.” Since my day is pretty much booked with friends and peers and family, I’ll have to sneak in some time to meet myself just before midnight, when today’s horoscope abruptly ends. I am not sure I want to meet myself if I’m considered a little bit strange, but I have no choice; it’s all fated in the stars.

The notion of astrology has fascinated me since I was a boy. The premise is that the positions of the sun and the planets in the sky have influence on human lives. One of the key factors is the sun’s position within the constellations of the zodiac. “Zodiac” is a wonderful Arabic word meaning “circle of life,” and it entered astronomical nomenclature during the medieval period when the Arabs led the world in astronomical observations. The zodiac is the apparent path that the sun travels through the sky during the course of the year. The constellations that happen to lie on this path are the familiar astrological constellations, like Leo. A lucky newborn’s fate is sealed by which one of the 12 constellations of the zodiac...
"All I needed was a passport to go through Dreams of Freedom: Boston's Immigration Museum. The museum, located at 1 Milk Street next to Downtown Crossing, gives each museum attendant a passport, and offers great video displays, props, and tidbits of information about more recent immigrants besides the ones made famous for coming over on that ship named after a moving company. It is not a big museum -- you can go through in an hour -- but the $6.50 college admission price is right. It is one of the few museums you do not have to dedicate a whole day to and can still leave with a wealth of knowledge.

Emily Slot Shaw, the Museum Educator, admits, "It's a challenge to make history interesting for people." Nevertheless, she says since arriving last April she has focused on taking personal history and making it more general so that everyone can share a universal experience. It's no small task, but she's done a good job.

Descending the staircase to the exhibit, you hear a myriad of languages coming from the speaker adding to the 'Ellis Island-esque' atmosphere. There are talking Irish, Italian, and African-American dolls, and panels of information detailing who the immigrants are and which countries they come from. Along the way you can punch your passport, which you receive at the beginning of the tour, and simulate the experience of an immigrant.

The rap video inspection squad was bizarre, but the wall of famous immigrants you can listen to around the corner (BU's Elie Wiesel, Patrick Ewing, Yo Yo Ma) makes up for it. There is also a great video interview section which that you to listen to Boston's own Mayor Thomas Menino and former Governor and Presidential Candidate Michael Dukakis discussing their experiences as prominent politicians with immigrant parents.

The Boston Immigration Museum also features art exhibits every month. The current exhibit is Muslim Artists East and West, and Shaw says that in the spring they are planning an exhibit on Irish women. While the MFA has earned a national reputation over the years as one of the best museums in the country, that does not mean the smaller museums should be ignored. After all, they all have to start somewhere. What better place for a new beginning than at the Boston Immigration Museum? •

Professor James Jackson

Astro, from 1

happens to lie behind the sun (your so-called "sun-sign") at the moment of birth. So when I say, "I'm a Leo," I am actually saying that at the instant of my birth, the constellation Leo was directly behind the sun. Because of this, I am supposed to be infused with leonine properties, just as Capricorns are hircine, Virgos virginal, and Libras measured.

Unfortunately, there is a problem. The earth's rotation axis doesn't actually remain constantly pointing in the same direction, but instead wobbles around in a circle like a flailing top. Because of this motion, the constellations seem to shift around on the sky. Today's North Star, Polaris, wasn't the North Star two thousand years ago. This wobbly motion, called "precession of the equinoxes," is so wonderful that it actually inspired a religion called Mithras, popular in the Mediterranean at the same time that Christianity began.

The precession of the equinoxes poses a problem for astrology. Although the positions of the constellations are apparently changing due to the precession of the equinoxes, the calendar isn't changing along with it. Thus, on the first day of spring 2000 years ago the sun lined up with the eastern edge of the constellation Pisces, but in the intervening millennia Pisces has shifted its position so much that today, on the first day of spring the sun now lines up with its western edge. Because astrology began in antiquity, the dates of your sun-sign were frozen in from ancient times, when the constellations appeared to be in different places than their present location. Thus, everyone born between February 19 and March 20 is a Pisces, because in ancient times, between February 19 and March 20, the sun was in the constellation Pisces when you were born—consequently, you were destined to be very fishy indeed.

Sad, due to the shifting of the constellations' positions, nowadays the sun doesn't actually enter Pisces until March 13, so those modern-day Pisces born between February 19 and March 12 actually were born with the sun in Aquarius—watery, yes, but definitely not fishy. In a few hundred years, the sun will be entirely in Aquarius between February 19 and March 20, and all those fishy Pisces will really be Aquarians. Those of you who know the song "Dawning of the Age of Aquarius" can now understand what they're really talking about. It's all very confusing. In my particular case, this shifting is extremely unfortunate. I am purportedly a Leo, but the day I was born the sun was actually smack dab in the middle of Cancer. This probably explains why, instead of being regal like a lion, I am actually quite crabby.

Astrology and astronomy parted ways in the Age of Reason, and I wonder why astrology continues to hold such sway. I can understand the idea that forces beyond one's control toss us around like a cork on the sea. I can also appreciate the idea of the mystery of the heavens. But I fail to understand why people would pay any serious attention to horoscopes. It may all be harmless fun, except when heads of state consult astrologers to guide them in important decisions, or when every year far more money is spent on astrology than astronomy.

Apparently people value the occult more than the truth. This is a shame, for science has a lot to offer. When people tell me science takes all the mystery and joy out of life, I tell them they don't know science. Just as learning a musical scale doesn't make Beethoven any less beautiful, understanding a little something about how Nature works in no way belittles her. Go look at Saturn through a telescope, or contemplate the fact that we are bathed in the afterglow of creation, or appreciate the beauty of a spiral galaxy whirling around with its 100 billion suns. When I do, I can contain neither my wonder nor my joy. If astrology sustains you, I am happy for you, but I'll stick to the real Universe, with its inexhaustible supply of beauty and awe. •

Professor James Jackson is an astrophysicist who teaches in Core Natural Sciences

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Talent Review

The Stars of the November 14th, Core sponsored Gala.

1. Raja Bhattar
2. Alan Batagan
3. Dave Ransom
4. Chrystina Gestelum
5. Terpsichore
6. Kol Echad
7. Linda Tan
8. Skaya Bilman
9. Susan Johnston
10. Claire Smith
11. Meghan Droste
12. Kristen Ferguson
13. "Fish Worship Blues Quartet"
14. Dean James Johnson
15. Professor Sassan Tabatabai
16. "4 Out of 5 Dentists"
17. Nicole Levitz
18. Mike Paone
19. Professor Alan Marscher as "Cosmos II"

Not pictured: Kristen Pounds
Core Grads on Core

What stays with you?

Memories & Advice from Alumni

Core is a community in the finest sense of that word.

Lars Andersen

(I decided to make it a haiku)

If they fit wear them
Stiff two years, but kept for life.

Dawkins rocks blue jeans.

Garrett Corbin

For me, Core means Plato conversations over Warren burritos, loud cheers for Prof. Marshner’s galaxy tunes, uncontrollable smiles when Christopher Ricks relates everything to Bob Dylan, and an indefinable sense of satisfaction when I realize just how much knowledge I really learned after two years. Core isn’t just about internalizing the lessons of old; it’s about learning to break through conventional boundaries and establishing yourself as an innovative, well-educated, confident individual in the contemporary world.

Holly Naylor

Core is an all-inclusive way of thinking. It makes one approach nearly everything as well-rounded as possible. It has been the Virgil of my collegiate education.

John Degory

What is unique about Core is that it connects thinkers, painters, and composers across countries and centuries. Reading Dante doesn’t make sense without reading Virgil and reading Virgil doesn’t make sense without having read Homer. In Core, you read it all, so that you can see the context within which the writer is working.

Leah Nichols

Core prepares you for those touchy situations when someone’s tooth happens to fall from their mouth, or when you realize as a group that there is just way too much to know. Or when you realize that some monkeys enjoy sex just the way humans do?” Best of all Core helps found friendships and forge bonds with intelligent, well-read individuals.

Eric Gaus

If you can survive Core, the rest of the University (including work for distinction) is cake.

Aynn Zahner
Buddha, from 1

center, given precedence because of Humanistic Buddhism’s emphasis on increasing joy in the present by incorporating spirituality into daily life. She also clarified the purpose of the ceremonial items accompanying the statues. Musical instruments like the ones we saw in the room ensure that even those in the very back of large temples are aware of what the sangha, or clergy, are doing. The da qing or ‘singing bowl’ is the leader of the instruments, used to signal different activities such as the start and end of chanting sessions. The tuan yu is a hollow wooden percussion chamber carved to look like a fish and beaten to control the pace of chanting. Chinese legend says that the fish – with its unblinking eyes – is an example of unsleeping diligence.

A particularly vital ceremonial item is the long, tapered paddle (sometimes called a “Zen stick”) that the master uses to smack the shoulders of those with poor posture or sleepy heads. According to Yifa, the sound of smacks around you is an excellent motivation to remain diligent: “Depends on their relationship . . . the closer they are, the harder they get hit!”

Yifa then introduced Xinyi Yang, a Center member and skilled guzheng player. Xinyi briefed us on her instrument, explaining how each of the 21 silk strings has an independently movable bridge, and how the right hand plucks and strums as the left depresses the strings to produce the semitones of the pentatonic scale. Xinyi played

“High Tower Mountain and Low Water” on the 6-foot long zither-like guzheng as Yifa led the group through a musical meditation. When we had our legs curled underneath us, our backs straight, and our hands cupped like the Buddha’s, Yifa instructed us to close our eyes and clear our minds of our schedules, stresses, and miscellaneous distractions.

We were instructed to think only of the music and to focus on the shape and texture of the sound. The composition was a dialogue between the open, slow, refined notes of the mountain and the faster, lighter melody of the river, like the Chinese ink paintings where the mountains and the water complement each other.

After we had opened our eyes and stretched our legs, Yifa described the diverse methods of meditation used in Buddhism to develop spirituality. Practitioners can contemplate a koan, or puzzle, or they can choose to recite a mantra. Sutra (Sanskrit for “thread”) meditation involves concentrating on a short, tightly worded aphorism. Yifa explained that some people also prefer using visualizations, or mandalas. Others choose to focus on the face of Buddha, “golden and dignified” as she described it, to still their mind and uplift their spirit.

After the lecture and recital, we reclamed out footwear and enjoyed a vegetarian meal in the Center’s teahouse. Bean-filled dumplings, bok choy and tofu stir fry, and sweet yam fritters were among the traditional items served with rice, noodles, and tea. Although Western utensils were available, Professor Eckel championed the use of chopsticks. While on the topic of Asian cuisine, he explained that it is a custom in some Asian cultures for students to present their teachers with birds’ nest soup. Since the gift is meant to restore vitality, Professor Eckel does not know if he should be flattered or insulted. He has received many, many bottles of the soup.

Free walk-in meditation, cooking classes, Chinese knot-tying lessons, lectures, and youth, beginner, and advanced meditation classes are among the programs the Center offers in both Chinese and English. “Thank Buddha It’s Friday,” is a popular, English-only program held every other Friday which includes a meditation session, a vegetarian dinner, and a talk about Buddhist values. Further information can be found on the Center’s website: www.gbbcc.org.

Objectives of Fo Guang Shan:
1. To propagate Buddhist teachings through cultural activities
2. To foster talent through education
3. To benefit society through charitable programs
4. To purify human hearts and minds through Buddhist practice

“If it weren’t for Philo T. Farnsworth, inventor of television, we’d still be eating frozen radio dinners.”

- Johnny Carson

On Core Natural Sciences

“Dude, I think”

Professor Marscher is lecturing today,” my roommate informed me last Tuesday as we descended the Towers’ stairway. “We’re starting the Big Bang.”

It didn’t hit me at first. But I soon realized there was potential for a very stimulating Core Natural Sciences lecture.

“Oh man, didn’t we download a song called ‘Explosive Origins’? Sounds kind of like the Big Bang to me. Maybe we’ll get another song!” Our pace quickened; strides lengthened. First Sargent College, then Burger King, and finally the Campus Trolley vanished behind us. Our eagerness grew as we neared the Tsai Center. Not speaking a word, we threw open the doors and sought out one very special object: Professor Marscher’s guitar case.

And there it was, on the stage. High-fives were exchanged. “Where should we sit, man?” I asked.

“Where do you think?” he replied mockingly. “Front row!” Naturally, it was wide open.

But Core Natural Sciences has more going for it than a crowning Marscher.

While all the discussion sections provide a review for the lectures, a few students receive an added bonus. Professor Marscher’s Honors section stimulates the mind just as much as the entertaining Continued Sciences pg. 6
The Core constituency currently

lectures.

The discussions themselves put a great deal of pressure on the mind. Professor Marscher guides the class to a high intellectual plane, expanding upon topics covered in lectures, especially the integrating forums. Some topics include the nature of reality, determinism, free will, Plato’s "Divided Line," causality, connections between science and religion, Conway’s "Game of Life," and the development of civilization—we rarely reach conclusions. Countless differing viewpoints arise as students speak their mind about the matter at hand.

Often, debates can go from extremely intense to dead silence in the blink of an eye. The silence is not due to a lack of understanding; rather, it is due to the gravity of the topic being discussed.

For instance, in the Plato’s "Divided Line" theory discussion, Professor Marscher started the class by putting his reading glasses down on his desk and asking, "Image or object?" The room was silent for a few moments until one student answered that it is an image—we can’t feel it, so we don’t know that it physically exists. The rest of class was spent developing observations and finding correlations between different layers of his theory.

In the discussion involving the "Game of Life," he asked, if entities in a computer-simulated world had the ability to reason and figure out the laws governing their existence, could they figure out and theorize where they came from or who put them there? We spent all fifty minutes of the section developing ideas towards the solution. One student answered that a deity might have been created to explain events in their world, while others based their thoughts on the computer environment and the programmer him/herself.

This is the greatest part of the class: ideas are tossed about, debated, rejected, and modified due to the diverse ideas and interests of all the students. The issues we discuss in class are the topics that scientists and philosophers are talking about today. The discussions give the students new ways to consider reason and new viewpoints on science and society.

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**Be a part of The Core Journal**

The Journal of the Core Curriculum, Volume XII is now accepting submissions. There also remain opportunities to be a part of the editorial board. For more information, contact core@bu.edu.

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**By the Numbers: Core Trivia**

The Core texts weigh 63 pounds.
The midterms for CC105 weigh 32 pounds.
Core uses about 1 million inches of videotape each semester to tape lectures.

Gender gap: The freshmen and sophomore Core classes have respectively, a 69-31 and 63-37 percent female-to-male ratio.

Core students…

- read 8807 pages from 61 books
- listen to 156 hours of lecture
- attend 242 hours of discussion
- write 145 pages in papers

The Core office goes through 72,500 pieces of paper each semester, which includes 65,800 for tests, syllabi, handouts, and flyers.

The Core began with 133 students in the fall of 1989. Enrollment for Fall 2002 was 503, a 280% increase.