

MindFIT Podcast – Cultural Appropriation Panel Transcript

Lauren Brown:

Hi, and welcome to the University of Toronto's MindFIT Lecture series. On this podcast, we discuss the Buddhist roots of mindfulness along with current issues in mindfulness and yoga. My name is Lauren Brown, and I'm the Mindfulness Meditation and Yoga Program Coordinator for the Division of Student Life. Thank you for listening.

Before we get started, I'd like to read our land acknowledgement. I wish to acknowledge the land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years, it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. Today, this meeting place is still home to many indigenous peoples from across Turtle Island, and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

I'd like to introduce our wonderful panel of speakers today. We are going to begin with two fantastic students who have been a part of our Work Studies program here at the Multi_Faith Center, Angelica Lozada and Mecca Hussein. Angelica is taking her master's here having just completed her undergrad, I believe last year, and she is studying East Asian studies. And Mecca is in her fourth year of study, studying English and double minoring in Education and Society and the Buddhism Psychology and Mental Health stream.

After our two lovely students are going to speak, we welcome Dr. Elli Weisbaum to the floor. Elli is a very accomplished academic and researcher, and she'll be sharing some of that with you along with having a practice that has lasted a lifetime. After Elli speaks, we're going to pause and give questions to Elli right in that moment so that she can attend to the realities of our busy lives. And then, we will close with Song, who is also a recent graduate from OISE, and a Mindful Moments Facilitator at Trinity College. Welcome, all. And Angelica, the floor is yours.

Angelica Lozada:

All right. Thank you, Lauren. So let me just get everything prepared and share the wonderful slides we have. All right. If I could get confirmation on if you can see them. Yep? Okay, perfect. So again, hello everyone. My name is Angelica. As Lauren said, I'm in my first year in the Masters in East Asian Studies here at UFT. Yeah, last year I had been a Work Study under the Multi-Faith Centre as a Assistant Program Coordinator. And it was such a wonderful experience, I decided to come back again this year, this time as a Student Interfaith Lead.

So to begin, Mecca and I will be talking and addressing cultural appropriation as well as cultural appreciation later on in mindfulness and yoga. So over the last decade or so, we have kind of witnessed the idea of cultural appropriation becoming a hot topic and leading to a number of different controversies. But we have witnessed this in the realm of social media, but in general, in life conversations that one might have with one another, these debates over what counts as cultural appropriation.

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So for instance, we've heard questions and debates over is it the wearing of cultural hairstyles and clothing by people who are not a part of that particular culture? Is it identifying as a member of a culture that is different from your own? Is it the running of a business that represents a different culture than your own as well? Or is it pursuing a hobby that originates from another culture?

Nonetheless, what all of these examples make clear is that cases of cultural appropriation comprise a variety of situations and phenomena. Some are about changing one's looks, others about behaving in a particular way, and others about creating something tangible. They also concern a variety of cultural categories, including some such as gender and sexual orientation. So I think just that last line itself is very important, because often cultural appropriation kind of just becomes conflated with debates surrounding ethnicity and race. And so, just recognizing that it compromises a lot of different identity forms as well.

Now, if we're looking to define cultural appropriation, in simplistic terms, we can understand it in the general sense as the taking from a culture that is not one's own of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history, and ways of knowledge. Now, despite this definition sort of alluding to the fact that cultural appropriation is a form of theft, there are no necessary laws or regulations that exist to ensure cultural appropriation doesn't happen. And we can sort of understand this as a symptom of globalization, where the sharing of cultures is seen as a good thing. Now, this positive understanding of cultural appropriation can rather be deconstructed when we reframe it as the theft of sacred items or practices while simultaneously profiting from their misuse.

To look further into the potential harms of cultural appropriation, we can turn into the work of Dianne Lalonde, who is a PhD candidate at Western, specifically with research interests with regards to cultural appropriation. And she identifies three potential harms of cultural appropriation. The first one is that of non-recognition. So it is the denial of cultural property ownership. It is a form of epistemic injustice. And we can understand it as kind of similar to subtler colonial practices of land theft, whereby cultural property is rendered unowned and available to be appropriated, and permission is not required if no one owns it.

The second potential harm is that of misrecognition, so culture is confined to a set of properties, and these properties typically take the form of stereotypes. It causes the greater society to view these properties as natural to the group that they're associated with. And in turn, it causes members of the group that is being stereotyped to internalize these properties, resulting in the emergence of feelings of shame and self-loathing. So we see with non-recognition and misrecognition that there is this creation of a hostile environment for all who are involved.

The last sort of potential harm that Dianne Lalonde alludes to is that of exploitation. And this is when cultural property is taken away at the expense of the cultural group and the benefit of the appropriator. So there's this loss of economic potential whereby certain cultural properties are wrongfully exploited for financial gain. And essentially, there's also this important aspect of commodification, where cultural property itself is turned into a commodity. So this disregards its spiritual or religious value. And we must pause to think here, is the being sold?

That said, moving on now to a case study of cultural appropriation, I am going to be turning to Danielle Thompson-Ochoa, an Associate Professor at Gallaudet University in Washington, her article on Is Yoga Cultural Appropriation? Now to begin, it is necessary to start with the definition of yoga. And in a

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general sense or a general manner, it is a set of physical and mental practices which originated in India between 200 BC and 8,200. With regards to the origins of yoga, it is said to be first introduced by Vedic priests in Northern India approximately 5,000 years ago. And the practice of yoga has developed through the intersection of India's three main religious traditions: Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism.

Originally and essentially, yoga was practiced to train the practitioner's mind to better experience the complex world surrounding them. With regards to yoga's sort of adoption in the West and popularization, we can attribute that to Vivekananda's introduction of yoga in the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. But nonetheless, what we see when we turn towards the yoga that is practiced in the West, there has been an emphasis on a simplified asana aspect, which is the physical postures of yoga as well as secular mindfulness practices that are used as therapeutic interventions rather than a practice for spiritual awakening.

So we then see that in the West, there is this tendency to situate it as a physical practice, void of its spiritual and philosophical intentions. And through this revision, Western adaptations have made these practices more accessible to a wider variety of practitioners. Because in doing so, it has alluded to the idea of yoga as a way to improve one's health and cope with stress, as well as it aligns with the overall Western trend of healthism. And as such, in the West, yoga is perceived as a form of fitness, to improve strength, flexibility, and overall well-being. And mindfulness is viewed as simply a tool for stress reduction.

Now to conclude, it's important to note that the practice of yoga and mindfulness itself by those who may not come from a culture that originally practices it, is not cultural appropriation to its own means. And this is because yoga is characterized by variation dating back to the practice of classical yogis. It is a continuously evolving form. It continuously evolves throughout the years, resulting in different forms of yoga available to practitioners. But nonetheless, in the context of Western practices of yoga, it risks becoming cultural appropriation when its religious origins are not recognized, and emphasis is placed solely on the physical aspects that leave out the original mental and philosophical intentions.

Now, I will end off my discussion on cultural appropriation here to then pass it on to Mecca so that she can then discuss cultural appreciation.

Lauren Brown:

Thank you, Angelica.

Mecca Husein:

All right. Thank you, Angelica. So hi, everyone. My name is Mecca, and I'm also a Work Study here at the Multi-Faith Centre, and I'll be talking to you today about appreciative knowledge. So appreciative knowledge can be defined as accurate and positive knowledge one holds about a worldview in contrast to inaccurate or selective negative knowledge. Appreciative knowledge or interfaith literacy is different from religious literacy because as Patel and Meyer write, "Although religious literacy might begin with the basic text and practices of major religious traditions, interfaith literacy focuses on those texts, practices, leaders, and stories that speak toward widely shared values and a sense of the common good."

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So gathering appreciative knowledge or increasing interfaith literacy includes recognizing the contributions of diverse traditions, empathetic understanding of the traditions, and seeking out information that you need to know in order to work effectively with different communities. So this is a type of learning that moves away from thinking about things in a purely academic manner, for instance, seeking out textbook or general knowledge. Instead, there's an intentional interaction between the person and the thing or person they're interacting with. So to compare these approaches and sort of reiterate the difference, consider for example, gaining general knowledge about a spiritual or faith-based group from an information card versus engaging with a piece of artwork by a person from that specific faith-based or spiritual group from a feelings perspective, and gaining fascination without the need for an information card.

So now let's discuss cultural appreciation. Cultural appreciation is when one seeks to learn and understand a culture or religious tradition as a means to broaden one's perspective of the world and engage in cross-cultural connections with others. So we can think of appreciative knowledge as the equivalent of cultural appreciation. So this means not just reading facts about a certain culture or religious tradition, but engaging with its members to understand their culture and religious tradition in a more personal manner. This includes listening to and engaging in conversation regarding other stories as the key factor in the difference.

So it's important to note, however, that engaging also requires exchange so that it doesn't feel like a one-sided extraction or become cultural appropriation. In other words, it's not simply learning about their tradition, but also being open to sharing your own background and experiences so that cross-cultural and interfaith dialogue may occur and ground one's connection. So if you're interested in learning more about appreciative knowledge, I highly recommend checking out the Multi-Faith Centre's Interfaith Leadership Certificate program using the link that's on the slide. And yeah, that'll be all for me. So thank you for listening.

Lauren Brown:

Thank you so much, Mecca. And over to Elli.

Dr. Elli Weisbaum:

Yeah, just to begin with, a thank you for creating a space to have this dialogue. I think it's so important as academics, as researchers, just as human beings, to ask ourselves this question, "What knowledge streams am I drawing upon? Have I honored the wisdom of those who came in the stream before me? What part of the stream am I contributing to? And who comes after me?" And so, there is stewardship of knowledge, stewardship of our land, stewardship of our communities that I think is so important, I hope, in any work that we do anywhere. And so, I'm really happy to be part of this dialogue.

A little bit more about me, I wear several hats at the University of Toronto. So I'm currently the acting Program Director and teach in the Buddhism, Psychology, and Mental Health program at New College in the faculty of Arts and Sciences. I'm jointly appointed in the Department of Psychiatry in the Faculty of Medicine. I am not an MD psychiatrist, I am a researcher. But that is where I do a whole bunch of research in medicine looking at how these teachings might inform the work of clinicians to support them individually in their wellness and what that means for communities. And I also have a cross appointment

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to the Dalla Lana School of Public Health in their IHPME program. A lot of acronyms. This is to say in my heart, these teachings belong in a lot of different spaces.

On a personal note and introducing ourselves, we have so much in our identity that cannot be seen in this moment. I can be considered neurodiverse. I come from parents who were refugees to Canada and the United States. I have an orientation as a white-skinned person in a heterosexual body, and these are all labels that mean different things in different spaces, so just to hold a whole bunch of parts of my identity that are not my titles at a university.

I also went to my first retreat with a scholar, peace activist, and Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, who transitioned to a cloud almost two years ago and is given the credit in the literature as coining the term Engaged Buddhism and engaged mindfulness. And so, I have trained in practice with that community, talking about actively engaging with. Since I was a child, I had the joy of going through their children's program, their teen program. I have received the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings from them, which is a traditional transmission of their wisdom and knowledge. I have worked in their Wake Up Schools program internationally.

So I hold, as each of us do, many seen and unseen identities. And perhaps as many of us do, those identities support each other, can be in tension with each other, and so all of this is as a researcher, interesting to me. I am curious about all of it. I'm curious about how it informs my work and my actions in the world. And I am grateful to be in a tradition that asks me to ask those questions.

So our topic, looking at what it means, and in my space just to share. So I have and continue to practice in a lineage and tradition that can be traced back to who we might call the historical Buddha in a Zen tradition. And I also research and implement mindfulness space interventions in healthcare and education settings. So a lot of rich conversation there.

I want to share a little bit about the work that I have done recently as a researcher, and then as I said, open up for questions. And I wanted to share some of the lenses and orientation that I bring to this work that for me is a guiding compass to what it means to do this work in a way that feels like ethical and meaningful.

And I think there's many ways. I was just talking to someone as scientists, as academics, we have codes of ethics. Those are just words on a page. What we do as researchers, right, that's the expression of it. And so, for me, that's really interesting. As a researcher, I am pleased to share I have an article being published, I just got the date, next Tuesday, in CMAJ, which is the Canadian Medical Association Journal on some of the research I'm going to talk about right now.

And it's so interesting. As a researcher, you claim to have ethics review and this and that, which of course we do. It's very serious. I'm not trying to underscore any of that. But you put in an ethics review, you say how you're going to run a study, but you run it. And so, I also think there's an interesting thing as a researcher, what is your orientation to ethics, and how do you really live that out are some rich areas for thinking about as researchers.

So the little piece I want to share, as I said, there's so much to discuss here, is my orientation to the central work that I've done that I did as a PhD student. I'm now publishing findings on, I'm now continuing this work in the faculty of medicine and beyond. And specifically, I studied and researched

the impact of what we're coining Applied Mindfulness based on Thich Nhat Hanh's guidance. The study was done with physicians, but looking more broadly to clinicians. And I actually developed and iterated a five-week program based on Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings. To our knowledge, no intervention or training program that has been researched has explicitly said that they are based in his teachings. And so, those teachings have a very specific lineage and wisdom, and I want to talk about how I worked with this community on that.

What I wanted to note, and I'm always inspired when we did this panel before, that one kind of concern we have around appropriation versus appreciation, how are we engaging? And as an academic and researcher, I'm sometimes confused by this, by how we don't maybe always know how to do this, which is we have in our tradition of scientific research, we cite our sources. This is very clear. It seems very clear to me. And so, when I was younger and I started reading some of the mindfulness research, I was just simply confused. There's all citations for bodies of knowledge like psychology or validated scales. And then it would say, "We did a compassion practice" and there was no citation.

So first off, as a researcher, I don't know what that means. There's a lot of different ways to do a compassion practice. So how can I evaluate the validity of this research? I always say if you're a surgeon, you're going to read a really good paper on a new surgery. Part of the way you can know if it's trustworthy is you've done the surgery, right?

And so as a young academic and practitioner, I was reading these papers and I was like, "Why are there citations for this type of knowledge but not this other type of knowledge that's here?" And to me, and John Kempf published a beautiful thing. He once said he's interested in bringing together the knowledge streams of science and dharma.

And so, to me, again, I'm not saying it isn't blurry and complicated and even who owns what and where things come from, there's a lot of questions. But as a young researcher, I always just thought, "Well, just cite it. Just say the tradition. Say the practice. If you're going to publish your interview guide and supplement your material, also publish the practice and author that you used." So yes, I'm not trying to say it's not a complex issue. And at the same time, I've always just had this question, "But we know how to do part of this, which is cite your source, do that part."

And so, to me, I'm really grateful to have done the research I do by citing a really specific source, which is Thich Nhat Hanh's body of work. And that source, if you go look at his sources, is cited really, really specifically. He's a wonderful scholar. And to really engage, intentional interaction, I really like that as well.

So when I was doing my PhD work, I specifically and intentionally had my program advisory committee, my PAC, that's the advisory committee that oversees your work and does kind of the check on your knowledge and progresses you through. And I formally requested, and this was based on precedence set through indigenous research methodologies, particularly in Canada, that I set up an advisory committee from the wisdom tradition upon which I was drawing and engaging with knowledge. So I set up a monastic advisory committee made up of senior dharma teachers from Thich Nhat Hanh's center in France, lovingly called my MAC. I had a PAC, program advisory committee, and a MAC, a monastic advisory committee.

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And both were part of the entire phase of my study and were part of the iteration and the discussion, and were actively involved in collaboration to the point I am so pleased to be able to make this claim. Last week when I was finalizing the proofs for the publication that will be in the Biomedical Journal, so we would say the final phase of a study is publication in many ways. I was emailing with my co-authors, Dr. Nicholas Chadi and Dr. Trevor Young, who in January will become the Vice President and Provost of our university. And I was also in a WhatsApp thread with Brother Pháp Linh, one of my monastic advisors, trying to finalize acknowledgments and what we were capitalizing in certain sections around Thay's work.

So really to say that this isn't a claim I made to say, "Oh, look what I did." That I know my work is better for the voices and the spaces that are part of it, and that we did it the whole way together. And lots of hilarious stories about trying to get monastics to give you feedback when they're on a three-month Rain Retreat in Plum Village, France, and you're trying to get them to comment on Google Docs, and then you get a... Yeah. Good times together, good learning from one another.

Maybe a few more things I want to say just before we open up for comments. Let me see. Oh yes, I just want to share while we're in this spirit also, to just keep asking good questions. As researchers, as allies, we may not always get something right, but we can keep being open to learning and iterating and progressing how we work. And I'm really, really open to that.

I want to read a quote from this book from Thich Nhat Hanh, my teacher. And it's called The Sun My Heart. It's from the introduction, and this quote actually starts off my dissertation. If you want to read it, it's in the UT Library. It's 400 pages, but the short one is coming out next week. It's only 3,500 words. But I just wanted to read this to us as we're thinking about this topic today. It specifically ties orientation around this source and body of knowledge that we might call Buddhist philosophy, Buddhist science, Buddhist religion. In some contexts, it's a religion and some, my understanding in ties is that this is kind of open source material, which is why I think it's used in so many places, and to also have respect for the different spaces it's in. I use those terms, Buddhist, philosophy, science, and religion because the Dalai Lama actually published and suggested distinguishing in that way. So you can look into that more later.

For now, let me read this from Thay's introduction to the book, The Sun My Heart. This is a quote that has motivated me, has felt like I have permission to do the work I do, and I think is an invitation to all of us in this field. "Meditators since the beginning of time have known that they must use their own eyes and the language of their own times to express their insight. Wisdom is a living stream, not an icon to be preserved in a museum. Only when a practitioner finds the spring of wisdom in his or her own life can it flow to future generations. Keeping the torch of wisdom glowing is the work of all of us who know how to clear a path through the forest in order to walk ahead."

So I'll just say, I think permission from the Zen Master to adapt, to make it the language of your times, and a deep question, "What is of service? What is collaboration? What is good meditation of our sources?" Yeah. So thank you for listening, and I think we'll open to some questions. If anyone has some questions, comments, I say words, what happened? What do you think? Please chime in.

Lauren Brown:

You can go ahead and jump on the mic or raise your hand physically or through the icon if you prefer. Yes, Kelly.

Kelly:

Hi, there. Thank you for sharing all of your thoughts. It was very insightful. I was wondering, so I'm completing my master's in Social Work. I'm planning to go into clinical practice like psychotherapy, those kinds of things. And I was curious what your thoughts are on ways to engage with these knowledges and these practices ethically when sharing them with clients, especially with clients who might be uncomfortable with the idea of engaging in religious or spiritual practices and discussions. I'm just thinking, of course, mindfulness practices are inherently, as we've been discussing, spiritually and religiously grounded. But we've seen them used in these very secularized ways in mental health spaces. And not wanting to repeat that, but also knowing that different clients have different needs and comfort levels and preferences, I was just curious your thoughts on that.

Dr. Elli Weisbaum:

Yeah. Wonderful question. Thank you. And again, I'll say I'm sharing from my own lens, my own orientation, and the practice community I come from. So there are different opinions. A few things. I heard a wonderful speaker from the United States who did a lot of peace activism work and marched with Martin Luther King say, "There was no Buddhism when the Buddha was teaching. So is it a religion?" So it's just a question we can ask.

I encourage you also to look at the Dalai Lama's quote, and I can try and send it to Lauren as a follow-up, really recognizing that in some spaces, this body of knowledge is and has become a religion. And we want to have respect for that and that practice, and that also this body of knowledge was taught as teaching for life. And so, it does not have to be inherently considered. And that is from maybe the leader of one of the biggest Buddhist religious contexts. So I do encourage you to look at that and to think, "What is my respectful approach to this? What am I bringing in?" For your clients, to be clear about its different roots, that's really important.

But I think there's all different approaches to this. I was at an airport with Thich Nhat Hanh once with 50 monastics in their robes and shaved heads. And someone walked up to him and asked if he was a Buddhist, and he smiled and said "No," and then walked away. And of course, he was renewing Buddhism, but he just had this smile because he said, "We all inter-are. I decide what I am every moment." So I'm not taking it seriously and not being incredibly respectful for any space where this has a religious context. I'm also encouraging us to look at the history of this body of knowledge and consider how we use it, where, and what that looks like.

I think for me, the most meaningful thing is when I would be working with someone, do I know what I'm drawing upon? So if I'm bringing in a teaching from Thich Nhat Hanh's community, to let them and myself know that, and to give that context really clearly. And sometimes I was told when I was doing this program, "Oh, physicians won't look like something because it's based in Zen Buddhist teachings, and then it's not secular." And I was like, "I think I'm just going to cite it really clearly." So the first thing we're just like, "Here's where it comes from. Here's the lineage. Here are all the teachers that came before it. Here's a book. Let us know if you have further questions. Now we're going to talk about the Noble Eightfold Path." And they were like, "Okay, great. Thanks for letting me know."

So as I said, a lot of just food for thought. How can we be respectful? How can we see it in different contexts? And also to give ourselves permission, like Thay said, to make it the language of our times, to

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meet that client where they need everything I have read from both Buddhist scholars and academics, those working with MBIs, John Kabat-Zinn's original intentions are the alleviation suffering. So if we are doing that well with respect and meaning, then I think the exact language we use and how we meet the person in front of us, we have some permission for my understanding from my tradition.

Kelly:

Thank you so much for that.

Lauren Brown:

Yes. Thank you, Elli. You beautifully described the messiness in some ways of this work. And I have, over the last couple of years, just come to really enjoy sitting in the messy, right? We have to find our own way. And I think that was a really lovely, lovely explanation for some of that. Is there anybody else who has a question for Elli?

I have one that I hope you don't mind. We hear a lot about Engaged Buddhism, Socially Engaged Buddhism. I wonder if you have a brief definition of that you could share with the group, and perhaps some insight into how they might take their practice from that cushion to an Engaged Buddhism.

Dr. Elli Weisbaum:

Yeah, so fun. And you also have your next presenter I feel like also will have some thoughts on that, which is fun. So this has roots, we might say, from an academic perspective. There's a great book by Queen and King called Socially Engaged Buddhism that I highly recommend that goes into more of the history of it, but that this is a movement. They are credited with coining the term, but a movement in Southeast Asia that was in response to post-colonialism systems of oppression, and looking at how to take these teachings, maybe a fierce compassion of sangha, of community building, into the world off the cushion.

They have done some amazing writing on this during the Vietnam War. He had this question, "Do I keep practicing in a monastery or do I go out into the world?" And he chose to do both. And so, the roots of Socially Engaged Buddhism are really about informing the actions that we take in the world, speaking out against injustice, organizing as communities, but doing that work. And it's not to suppress our anger, but to take this motivation and to live it out in a way of compassion, in a way of community. And so, those are some of the roots. And then it has evolved over time, but that's a bit of its kind of historical context.

Currently, there's lots of Engaged Buddhist movements around the world. I can say in Toronto, there's several Thich Nhat Hanh communities, and those are all based in Engaged Buddhism. And it's about bringing it into everyday life: my thoughts, my speech, my actions, how I walk, how I eat, how I brush my teeth.

Plum Village has a free app, so I can make a plug for that, which is if you want to just get some guidance on this, and you can probably spotlight in the app Engage Buddhism, and you'll get a little write-up from Thay. And we at U of T have Wake Up Toronto, which is a community of young practitioners in their twenties and thirties that practice in the tradition of Engaged Buddhism. So you are all welcome. We're

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online most days. On the 27th, we'll be at the Multi-Faith Centre at 8:00 P.M. So I encourage you to, yeah, where does it fit in your life? What's the language of your times? And that social engagement is of this movement from more recently 50s and 60s, kind of streaming into now, is a continuation of this knowledge with this specific lens towards engagement in the face of social oppression and needs.

Lauren Brown:

Thank you, Elli. And I'll share Wake Up Toronto's link in the chat as well. I've put up the Plum Village link. You can find, as Elli says, lots of amazing resources there. Are there any more questions for Elli, Dr. Weisbaum, before we let her go? All right. Well, if you have questions that come up later, I am more than happy to try to connect and find an answer for those. Elli, thank you so very much for being with us today, and we look forward to connecting again in our programming.

Dr. Elli Weisbaum:

Wonderful. Well, thank you for this programming. Thank you for all of you. No one made you come here, so you are here to help us continue to clear the path and walk through the forest as a community. So it's so nice to connect. And Lauren, thank you for just continuing to iterate this programming and have this space, and to everyone who presented. So thanks for having me. Sorry I have to go, and wishing everyone well in whatever big or small ways wellness may be available.

Lauren Brown:

Thank you. And with that, we're going to hand things over to Song.

Song Ge:

Thank yo, Lauren. It's an honor to be one of the panelists tonight. My name is Song. So currently, I'm a Facilitator at Mindful Moments. And just a heads-up, I might be looking at my notes so I'm not too nervous to share. And I will share my personal experience rather than from an academic will of looking at today's topic.

So to start, I want to share a little bit background where I come from. So basically, I grew up in Asian Buddhist culture. My first encounter of Buddhism is Zen Buddhism, where I attended a summer camp at the Zen Temple and I learned how to meditate. And late, I just continue learning all the different Buddhism like Tibetan Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism. And that's my main practice of learning Buddhism and also the meditation. Actually, I learned a different aspect of I would call Buddhism such as Engaged Buddhism, just as Elli just shared, and also Secular Mindfulness at U of T.

So to me, it's very interesting to see a different perspective, to see the practice, to see Buddhism. It's always been fascinating to me to learn different aspect of Buddhism, and I want to share one small piece of things I have learned. So I used to have a view that only the formal sitting meditation is considered the practice until I start to integrate mindfulness into my daily life. And that a part of that practice comes from learning Secular Mindfulness practice. So it really benefits me a lot. Some people ask me, "What is the biggest thing you have benefited from this practice?" I would say resilience. That's my answer to that question.

And I also want to share my experience as a Facilitator of Mindful Moments. So it's been very interesting to facilitate Mindfulness Meditation. So in the meditation class, I try to cultivate this non-judgment attitude, because I found it's very crucial to students. Especially when the session is towards the end of the semester, I see students are so stressed, and I think a little bit of self-care, self-compassion, even this attitude of non-judgment can help them a lot. So I always start from this practice of non-judgment.

And based on my understanding, this core practice of this attitude can be also found in the Buddhist roots. So where you can find the Buddhist text talks about how you can just relax and watch maybe eating ox grass without getting involved. So you can just sit there. Maybe you can sit there against the tree and just relax and just watching everything happening in front of you without getting caught up by your thinking, by all the worries. So I think that's a core attitude when we practice this Mindfulness Meditation. And I always try to encourage participants of the mindfulness session to have this attitude so they can use this attitude towards themselves, also towards the daily challenges. So even the mindful moments are within the secular context. Sometimes when I share or debrief the practice, I will talk about, "Where does it come from?" I think it's also a way to honor the tradition.

One thing I have been thinking about, the concept of Eightfold Noble Path in the Buddhism. So during this panel we have talked about this a little bit. So Eightfold Noble Path, that's one important concept in Buddhism. So in the Eightfold Noble Path, the right mindfulness is only part of the eight concepts. And I find that usually in a non-religion or a secular context, we only talk about mindfulness. We don't talk about other seven parts. And I think there's a reason for that.

I think surely if we don't talk about this mindfulness in a more religious context, we can have more people get in touch with mindfulness practice. And that's one of the benefits I see. And in the meantime, I think if we appreciate the Buddhist roots, we might be also benefit from the Buddhist context of understanding this mindfulness practice. So for me, the Eightfold Noble Path is a whole practice.

For example, the first thing we talk about, right view, I think it deals with people's cognition. So when people have a right way of thinking or right way of looking at things, they can have the right way of thinking and the right way of talking and acting. So I think it's very interesting to see the connection from Buddhist practice and CBT, so cognitive behavioral therapy. So we talk about how cognition plays an important role here. And when people have a right way of looking at things and right way of speaking and acting, or I should say maybe a healthier way of doing things, then they have a healthy way of living. If they have a healthy way of living, they have a healthy lifestyle, then they have the right effort to do right things. They have the rightful mindfulness and how they pay attention to things, how they give full attention to things.

So eventually, all the practices come together and all the practices help with establishing right view of looking at things, looking at the world. So personally, I think Secular Mindfulness gives a wide range of population an opportunity to enter the practice of mindfulness. And in the meantime, Buddhist root practice can be appreciated by those who want to establish their practice in-depth. So if they want to deepen their practice, they can also go into this more maybe Buddhist-related practice. So from my point of view, I don't see those two way of practicing conflicting each other. I think they can work together perfectly. Yeah. That's some of the thoughts I have been thinking, just want to share. Thank you.

Lauren Brown:

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Thank you, Song. That was wonderful. When you spoke about the Eightfold Path, it really made me think about how this is often visually presented to folks, right? So sometimes we see it visually presented as like a 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 in a row, which kind of gives the impression that we start with one. And when we've got that right, we start with the next one, and we start with the next one. It's also sometimes positioned as a wheel, right? And that too, to many of us, we might read it going around the clock, first, second, third, fourth, and round. But the way you've talked about it is that really that this is intertwined and overlapping, and so right mindfulness, by virtue of being part of this path, this way to approach mindfulness as a path rather than as sort of a skill-based in isolation, you're really talking about engaging that right speech, right action.

And for me, right speech is always one of those tricky ones, because I find that we speak in short form very quickly with one another in passing. And Angelica and Mecca, you see Clara and I do this in the office. We're very quick, quick, quick, quick, quick. And then, mistakes can happen, simple mistakes, but sometimes also misunderstandings. And I think that's where right speech is such an incredible skill to hone in on. And it does take that present moment consciousness of being mindful in the moment. And in that way it is that engaged. And for me, that starts to look like that Engaged Mindfulness, where all of our interactions become very conscious.

So thank you for the way you talked about that. It was really... I was like suddenly I was seeing it like that multiple circles in the Venn Diagram all requiring one another to kind of co-exist. So thank you for that. Does anybody have questions for Song or for Angelica or Mecca?

All right. Well, with a kind of a quiet floor, which often happens after this particular topic is shared, perhaps we might just sort of talk about or even brainstorm ways that we might engage in that appreciative action that Mecca was sharing. Maybe this is ways that you have sort of thought about or engaging in that search for deeper knowledge and bringing it into your own practice or into your work, as Kelly was sort of thinking about. And this doesn't have to be... This is not a pass/fail, but what types of things have you done or are you now thinking about doing? Or could one do?

Jasmine:

I was finding it really interesting what Elli was talking about, how many resources there are around that I was just totally not aware of. I don't know. I got into meditation kind of on my own accord and my own way and my own space without really looking externally of where it came from. And my Gramps was a practicing Buddhist a long time ago when he lived in India, and he never really practiced it when I was around. And so, he doesn't know as much about it anymore. I've tried to ask him. I've tried to get in there, and he just doesn't really have that information.

But knowing that there are a lot of resources around like the Waking Up Toronto and some of the other, the Plum Village website, I've written those down as little notes to go check out and to try to understand how I can engage, be more aware and more socially responsible so I can understand how to make my own practice kind of like Elli was saying with the language of the times and how I've been doing it personally, but also with the consideration of actually where it's coming from and what it is to its core. So yeah, I've really enjoyed this talk. It was really great.

Lauren Brown:

Oh, thank you. That's great to hear, Jasmine. And I think that is that. There's that sort of curiosity about this topic. I feel like this is the kind of stuff a lot of folks want to talk about, but it's sort of like, "How do we hang out, find people that want to talk about this and hang out and talk about this? And where is the space for this?" If you do go out to any of the Mindful Moments sessions, you're going to find folks who are kind of excited to talk about it and hopefully meet people with different lenses on the subject.

You might want to think about digging... I think there was something really rich in what Elli was talking about. When you do a practice, if you're doing Insight Timer or an app and you learn a new practice, maybe just Google it, starting with something simple. Start with a Google search, "Where does this practice come from? What is it all about?" If you're with an instructor who's teaching something, ask them whose meditation it is. And certainly, if you're facilitating meditation, one of the things I encourage folks who do that Module Three of MindFIT to do, is really if you read a practice, cite the book. Just like Elli held up the book, I'm often guilty of going, "So this is what I'm reading from today."

And sometimes there's a reason why we would read a practice. Even if we can do a practice off the cuff, because we practice a long time, we can still read the practice so it's done the exact way that that individual intended it. And I think there's something really meaningful about that. It can seem so simple. Any other just thoughts or general questions that are popping into your mind today based on our topic? Hey, Jamie. Yeah.

Jamie:

Yeah. I have a quick thought process here, I guess. Yeah. So I was reading a lot from women. I'll wind back a bit, but yeah, when I started off meditation and stuff, it was very secular, I guess. I learned from some guy who I guess learned a lot about Eastern philosophies and stuff, but the way he taught meditation was very secular. So it was just focus on your breath type of thing. And then, over time I was like, "I've got to learn more about this stuff. I want to go to the roots and just figure more about the traditions and stuff." So I read some books on things like that.

But I came across an Indian philosopher named Jiddu Krishnamurti. I don't know if anybody's heard of him. But what's really interesting from his books is that he says that meditation should be done, this is his perspective, but it's like meditation should be something that you find out for yourself. So you shouldn't just go to someone and then just copy and paste what they're doing and not think for yourself. Yeah. That was a major thing for him, is he wants you to think for yourself and figure things out on your own so that you'll learn more instead of being a bit mindless.

And so, that's really impacted the way I see meditation or yoga now, is I don't really follow a specific way of meditating and I kind of just do my own thing. And so, when you say we should, I guess, follow more closely and respect the roots of some of these types of meditations, I thought that was really interesting. I don't know what my point is, but I think it's just kind of what my brain's been thinking about, where it's like, "Should I try to follow one way of meditating or certain types or just try to do your own thing?" But yeah. I don't know.

Lauren Brown:

, I think what you're raising is some really, really interesting things. And I love that you're kind of going into that deep dive personally. You're thinking about this personally. You're looking for your own

orientation around this personally. And I think that in and of itself, as you're speaking, what I'm hearing is something that as an education student, I'm just finishing and about to defend my thesis. And one of the things I kind of get to is this critical first-person learning, and how important it is that when we're talking about things that have personal meanings, spiritual meaning or personal value and can move into a belief, it is so essential to do just what you're talking about, Jamie. It's not just doing it because we're copying the person next to us or social media said, "This is a great plan." But it's like trying something, reflecting, understanding, "What was their merit in this for me? And in which ways was there?"

I think what you're saying by going to some of the original texts is also showing that through doing that, you're cultivating this natural curiosity to want to kind of know more. Malina Bondy was speaking last week about multiple Buddhisms, right? That Buddhism, singular, did not move from one place to North America. Many Buddhisms grew and developed. And in the same way, you see somebody like Thich Nhat Hanh, you'll often hear folks say, "I practice in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh," and specifically give that credit. But in saying that, that acknowledges that there is another body of way to practice, right? There's many other ways to practice.

As somebody who sits in that, what I usually say is spiritual but non-religious stance, that's where I situate myself. For me and for folks who know my study, it's about student well-being and mental health. For me, that's all about finding what it can be useful and meaningful to us. That layer of getting a cultural appreciation, I think, ideally will come where we find deeper meaning and value. And absolutely if we're facilitating or teaching this, we have a responsibility, this is a great word that many folks have used today, to have a deeper comprehension, both for ourselves and then teaching it.

And then, Jamie, another thing you mentioned that was quite wise was that idea that we can't just teach this without having a practice, right? To just teach this because you know it's used, I think, Kelly, you're a great example. You know it's used in social work, but you're digging into this work. I see you at a lot of different events. I know you're working on the MindFIT modules.

And I think that's so really important, because everybody has access to just print off a script and read it. And you can read it for yourself, or you can read it to your high school class, and you can read it in a kindergarten class and you can read it in the workplace, and you can read it in therapy, and there's nothing that would stop folks other than that moral component, right? That's where we come back to that right action. How is this going to sit with you? If you don't know this practice, why would you take someone else through it? So lots of good stuff there. Jamie. Your thought process was really neat, and a great place for me to jump off and spiral into some subject areas that I love.

Is there anything else anyone wants to share or dig into before we go for the evening? Well, all right then. I want to say a huge thank you to our wonderful panel, including Angelica, Mecca, and Song, who are still here with us. If folks would like to practice with Song, he's got a few more sessions at Trinity College this semester. I popped that link up in the chat. And then, we'll be back with us in the winter term at the same place, at the same time. Thank you all so much for being here. Have a wonderful rest of your night.

On behalf of MindFIT, the Multi-Faith Center, and the Division of Student Life at the University of Toronto, thank you for listening and hope you join us for more.

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