

MindFIT Podcast - How Buddhism travelled East to West with Melina Bondy 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.

Fiza Mahtani:

Before we begin today, we wish to acknowledge this land under 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 the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island, and we're grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land. So our lecture today is on how Buddhism has traveled from east to west with Melina Bondy. Melina began meditation and Dharma practice in 2003, eventually taking monastic vows under Thích Nhất Hạnh in 2012. They offer somatic psychotherapy as well as teaching meditation and Dharma classes oriented towards social justice and creativity. Melina completed the True North Inside Community Meditation Leadership mentorship program in 2022 and has completed almost a year of silent meditation retreats. Melina is passionate about sharing their knowledge with the broader community, and we are very lucky to have them lecture today. You'll have the opportunity to ask your questions at the end. And for now, Melina, the floor is yours.

Melina Bondy:

Thank you, Fiza. Thank you, Lauren. Thank you everyone, and thank you everyone on the recording. I'm glad to be with you for this really important topic of how Buddhism has traveled, I think globally, whether that's east to west or multi-directionally. And so, you heard a little bit about where I'm coming from and I've also almost completed the Master's of Pastoral studies at Emmanuel College, also one of the theology schools at U of T. And so, in those classes, I really took the time to not only train in the counseling skills as I'm now with the psychotherapist, but also I got to dive into a lot of the Buddhist courses. And so, one of my major research papers was on the movement of Secular Buddhism, so that I could really understand how did this come to be. It's not actually something that I particularly participate in or ascribed to, but things that I found kind of concerning because I had been steeped in a more traditional Buddhist space.

And then coming out of the monastery and meeting a lot of folks practicing and teaching mindfulness in non-religious spaces, I was excited by some of it and I was confused and concerned by some of it. So, I've done a lot of studies of some of the details. So, this is what I'm going to be able to share from tonight is where my research brought me. It's by no means extensive and complete, but it is quite researched, and I've come back to it a few times through the years since I wrote this particular piece of research because I kept tweaking different pieces and learning more as I was studying other things because I find it kind of foundational to know the history and know the context for today's engagement, and to discern how to move forward in a way that's respectful and skillful.

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Because there are many Buddhisms, the term Buddhism doesn't really exist in any other language. We have words that get translated to Buddhism, but in English, the term came from European colonial administrators or translators, right? And I bring this up because what we call Buddhism in English lumped together so many regions, different people's lineages, ceremonies, customs, rituals, festivals, who for the most part had no interaction with each other, other than those going back to India. They often didn't even know that there was a relationship between what was happening in Tibet and Japan and Sri Lanka. They knew that the Buddha came from India and different lineages, they'll be aware of how that spread. But there's so many ways that Buddhism traveled before it came to Europe and North America that I always like, I try to say Buddhisms from time to time just to remember that even though the word sounds like it's one thing, it's many, many things.

And so, I just want to bring in here, I do not speak Mandarin, but I understand Fójìào, would be a more Mandarin pronunciation. In Vietnamese, Phật Giáo. Japanese, Bukkyō. In Pali, **Buddha damma (?)**, which are terms like the Buddha's Way or the Buddhist teaching. The natural law of things is how these traditions refer to themselves from within. And it's not a big difference from Buddhism, but Buddhism can sound like it is an ism, a belief system, something to ascribe to something that's quite formulated. And there's something for me in just saying the Buddhist teaching that kind of brings a bit more direct to "what is this". So, I want to offer that. And you often will hear me and other people just refer to the Dharma because the Dharma is the Buddhist teachings or Buddha Dharma is a bit more of a traditional way that actually relates to what these names are in the Asian languages that they come from. So, that's some of the history of that.

And so, some of the sources of the migration of Buddhisms through the centuries and how they made their way to, we said east to west, I'm going to be looking particularly in a North American context, but there's obviously many more migratory paths that have been happening the last few centuries. And as I said, migratory paths have been happening for 2,600 years. So, that's what this tradition has been doing the whole time. And some of the main sources of migration include colonialism, communism, and counterculture. Not exclusive, but these are some of the big ones. I wanted to start by **Damien** Colonialism, which is not what everyone starts with whose looking at this topic. But some of the texts that came to the West first came because of the encounter of Christian missionaries who were part of colonial missions, who part of the governmental process was also seen as a religious mission starting in the 16th century. And at that time, most Christians considered Buddhism as a rival to Christianity. They studied it in order to defeat it. They didn't usually study it because they wanted to appreciate the tradition.

And so, specifically the Sanskrit and Oriental studies that we had starting, especially late 18th century large through the 19th century, were very much in this mindset of "we have to study our colonial subjects so that we can rule them better". And so, this is not just of note, but if you're ever looking at old texts, they're probably translated by someone in this mindset. So, it's really important to just remember there's a lot going on when we're looking into dictionaries, when we're looking into yeah, old translations of central texts. And so, many of them thought of Buddhism as this very nihilistic, pessimistic, or idolatrous religion because it wasn't Christianity.

And so even when, say Madame Blavatsky and Henry Olcott who are part of the Theosophical Society, they became the first sort of, well-known people to become Buddhists from, I think one was from the states, one was from England. Even when they did this and they were saying, this is great, we're going to come join. Even they had this attitude of like, and we're going to help you make Buddhism better

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because we know the right way to study it through a Protestant lens of studying the scriptures and taking out cultural specificity. So, just to be careful when we're looking at old and there's a very long history of cultural superiority that gets blended into how things have traveled in so many ways. But we're looking specifically at Buddhism here.

And then there's the colonial shape of migration. The first Buddhists in North America were Chinese immigrants who came to work for the Gold Rush in 1848, California mostly. And Japanese immigrants came to Hawaii and farms in California. And 1850s, 60s is when that began. And by 1893, the first Japanese priest came to San Francisco, founder of the Buddhist Churches of America is what they called it because they had to use the terms of the time to have any degree of acceptance and to try to minimize the prejudice they faced. And so, we don't have the same degree of there is awareness of, I think the first temple was in Vancouver, the first Buddhist temple in Canada, was in Vancouver in the 1850s.

But again, as we're looking at this context, immigrants from Asia at that time or laborers weren't given citizenship, weren't given rights, weren't really allowed to... So, there's also this complicated history when we think of the earliest Buddhism that has come to North America, and these folks are still here, these organizations are still alive and well, if anyone of you knows Jenny Bright, who I don't know if she's giving one of the lectures, she's part of the Jodo Shinshu Temple in Toronto. This organization is still going strong. They didn't go anywhere, even if they aren't at the center of what is maybe well known in the English speaking Buddhist groups and communities. And so, Buddhist modernism is this whole movement that actually started in Asia, not in Europe and North America.

And if we understand modernism as sort of a mentality that goes hand in hand with colonialism of this idea that we can subdue the natural world through ration and scientific technology, and all the technological advances that have come with that, and also the sort of destruction of relationships and the environment and all sorts of things that have gone together. Well, that also impacted how Buddhism developed in Asia before it affected how Buddhism developed here. So, there's a number of folks who see that modernizing, so bringing in a scientific perspective onto the Buddhist teachings was part of often a response to try to fight back as colonialism was trying to push down Indigenous and local religious movements in favor of Christianity, usually so that some of the spiritual leaders will say, well, I've studied your science and here my traditions is actually entirely aligned. And so, there's this famous debate in 1873 in Sri Lanka where an Anglican priest debated this Bhikkhu Gunananda and the bhikkhu, the monk, he won, and he was clearly had the superior reasoning and rationale.

And so, this was the first sort of known as the first Buddhist modernist public lecture. And this kind of movement was happening in many places. In 1893, we had the Parliament of the World Religions, which happened in Chicago where they brought in folks from all over the world to different religions. And it was the beginning of starting to shift from colonial rule to interest, and maybe let's talk together, but it was still very much infused through this imperialist kind of mindset. But at that event, there was a Buddhist, Japanese Buddhist priest and some other lay practitioners, Sri Lankan monk and others, and they were all pretty much within the Buddhist modernist view, they were coming and sharing and able to use the language of science to discuss what their tradition was about. And so, Dharmapala from Sri Lanka ended up being invited to come back a number of times to the states on lecture tours. And he ended up meeting a lot of prominent psychologists, including William James, who was very central in American psychology.

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And it said that when Dharmapala came to William James' lecture, William James actually said, "Oh, I'm going to give you the floor," because he said, "This is better than anything that I could say." So for some folks, there was this sort of immediate reaction of something that was really beautiful and supportive, and I don't know why my hand is up. I didn't do that. So, then the next name that we have sort of in this Buddhist modernist migration of practices is D.T. Suzuki who came to the US for the first time, sort of in the wake after the Parliament of World Religions. The culture that was sort of opened up because of that. He was invited to come lecture in 1897, and he really was the central person who popularized Zen Buddhism in North America, the States, in Europe. I don't know about the other Anglo areas, but certainly these areas. And the thing to understand is that he was not a monastic or priest or even necessarily a really engaged practitioner. He was an academic and a philosopher.

So, a lot of folks have come back to his books in the current period going, "I see where he's coming from, but that's not entirely, actually, he's kind of missing the point of some things". I'm not a big scholar of D.T. Suzuki's work. It's just a common refrain that I've seen from a lot of engaged Zen practitioners. So again, these texts that sort of open the way for what we are now living often came through translation through these kind of interesting situations, but that also didn't necessarily reflect the depth of the tradition or full understanding. But they've also did a lot of good and have shaped a lot and are just good to know about in terms of the many streams that have carried one tradition, many traditions to a new place. And so with that, I also want to name Ledi Sayadaw. Sayadaw is named for a monk in Burma. He developed a modernist kind of meditation practice that was new to Burma. Obviously he passed away in 1923. So it was, I think near the end of his life, early 1900s that he started teaching meditation practices to regular people.

And that didn't happen before. That was not a common practice. People go to temple to pray, to ask for a blessing, to connect with ancestors, to do ritual and ceremony, but very few people actually meditated. And because again, of this imperial and colonial pressure that was kind of trying to erode Buddhism, there was a counter movement of folks were saying, "no, let's renew. Let's do this differently. Let's strengthen our culture, our traditional, and religion". And so, one way that this happened was starting to create these 10 day retreats where anyone could go, you could get time off work. I can't remember if it was paid time, but it was supported by the government. It was quite a big deal in Burma that then Ledi Sayadaw's student U Ba Khin sort of became the main teacher of, and then U Ba Khin student, S. N. Goenka became the next sort of head teacher of this style of practice in Burma. But S. N. Goenka was actually Indian, part of the expat community in Burma.

And so, S. N. Goenka came back to India, spread it there, and then people from all over the world were traveling in India, started doing retreats with him. Centers have popped up, and they are around the world from this very specific response to colonialism that then proved very popular, and it came through this modernist impulse to present the teachings without the religious aspects. But that came, that wasn't necessarily what everyone was practicing. It was a very specific response to a specific time and place. And so, when a lot of people these days hear about Vipassana Retreats, this is what they think of. There's a center in Barrie just north of Toronto where you can go, it's completely by donation. It's the same set of teachings because all the teachings are done by video recording. So, you get the same teachings that have been shared for decades, taught all around the world that came out of this Buddhist modernism in Burma. So, another source of traveling or the movement of the Buddhisms from Asia to North America and Europe and elsewhere. Unfortunately, a lot of it was due to war.

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And communism in particular because of the repression of religion, caused a lot of Buddhists, Buddhist teachers, monastics, laypeople to have to flee. So, in the slides I write, some did come West by choice. You have Shunryu Suzuki Roshi and folks like him. He created the San Francisco Zen Center. He didn't come because of persecution. He came because it was an interesting opportunity. And the Japanese community in San Francisco wanted to bring priests over in Japan. However, other really important teachers came West because of exile, specifically communist governments or other situations of war. So, most notably his holiness the Dalai Lama, I mean, he moved to India, but he has become a global figure because of communism, because of the political situation. My own teacher, the venerable Thích Nhất Hạnh, had to go into exile because he didn't take sides with the north or the south in the war. And then once the communists won, Thích Nhất Hạnh's photo was still up in a Museum of war criminals in Hanoi.

And so, also Master Hsuan Hua who founded The City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in California, he had to leave China because of communism. So, there's a lot that kind of really destabilized, and in some places almost destroyed a lot of the Buddhist traditions in Asia because of political changes. And some of those folks ended up escaping and having to move and live elsewhere. And some of them, as we know, ended up in India or maybe Hong Kong, but then others went other parts of the world. So, that's important also to remember. Then of course, these displaced and diasporic communities eventually created temples where they would bring monastics and teachers over to support their communities. And again, that still happens today. As again, we're looking at different Buddhist traditions, a little looking into like, oh, yeah, what was the migratory path of this particular teacher or community? Because there's no one general story, but especially the communities where it was exile, where there's mostly refugees, they tend to have a lot fewer resources, less influence in the academy, although not so for Tibetan Buddhism.

And then the communities where folks came over by choice and not because they were of refugee status, they tend to just have different dynamics that are worth noting. And just holding in mind, as I know for myself, I just often kind of have my hands out and feel the bounty of how lucky I am to have received these beautiful teachings. And my mind just kind of gets to travel along like, wow, there was that stream and that stream, and all the many ways that currently have the beautiful opportunity to be in touch with so many different traditions. And yet some of it came through war and oppression and exile and really horrific situations. And so, just to hold that in respect in our hearts can already be an important move. And then the counterculture, which is a little more well known, especially through sort of Anglo-American community. So, they were The Beat Poets folks like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, fifties, sixties, and influential writers like Alan Watts, who very actively studied D.T. Suzuki's work who we saw just two slides ago.

So, even though D.T. Suzuki was a little earlier, his works really influenced a lot of people. Then there were groups of European North Americans who traveled to Asia themselves, some earlier but there was sort of a boom that started in the sixties. A lot of them went to do Peace Corps work or a university exchange. And while they were there, they were like, huh, what's this temple that's in the village that I'm working in? Or it wasn't always specifically initially to study meditation and Buddhism, but by being there, then some engagement happened, and some people came specifically to study with spiritual teachers, not just Buddhist, but we're looking at Buddhism now. So, some very significant teachers, S.N. Goenka, who I mentioned earlier, influenced so many people, even folks that that's not their main tradition. I mean, you can read just about any biography of someone who went to India to study anything spiritual in the sixties, seventies onwards. And they've probably all done at least one course with S.N. Goenka, this was incredibly powerful.

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Ajahn Chah in Thailand, a lot of folks went and practiced with him or with his students, and now there's a whole worldwide network of Thai forest lineage. And so, like Jack Kornfield, who will mention the next slide, who's a well-known teacher who was a monastic under Ajahn Chah. And so my current teachers, Thanissara and Kittisaro were monastics under Ajahn Chah. And so, very, very influential, obviously, his Holiness, the Dalai Lama people also came and studied with him and other Tibetan teachers. And then the folks who came were often drawn to more modernist Buddhist teachers. And so then they received teachings. Some of them stayed for years and practiced some shorter times. And then when they came home, they often, some of them became scholars like Robert Thurman, who's a Tibetan scholar, father of Uma Thurman, the actress. Some became psychologists like Jack Kornfield, and then others became Dharma teachers without adding anything else, like scholar psychologists. So, we can think of Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein, many, many other people. But again, these are some of the more common names that people might be aware of.

And so from that stream, we have this burgeoning field of the psychology of mindfulness, where traditional and modernist Buddhist streams have always had psychology as a really central part of Buddhism. It's just for 2,600 years, there has been a Buddhist psychology or many Buddhist psychologies. And even in the Buddhist time and shortly thereafter, people would colloquially call monastics, Hey doctor, because it was said that they had the medicine to heal the heart and the mind. So, there's been an awareness of the healing or liberating or soothing and freeing capacity of the Buddhist teachings to transform how our minds work to understand and transform how our minds work from the beginning. So, it's not surprising that this tradition has really taken root in psychology, but it's also important to notice that it's especially the modernist interpretations that work well with psychology because there's many, many, many other esoteric ritually oriented practices that don't really get a lot of attention because they don't line up as easily with Western psychology. But all the traditions have psychology in them, their own psychology that's much older than western psychology.

And then we had people actively making these connections. So, I name again, Jack Kornfield who had been a monk in Thailand when he became a psychologist. He then kept teaching meditation and practiced psychology, and now has training programs that tens and thousands of people have done and written tons of books, and has really been one of the central pillars in this versioning Buddhist psychology or the meeting of Western psychology and Buddhist psychology and His Holiness The Dalai Lama is probably even a bigger factor here, who started sponsoring the Mind & Life conferences, I think in the eighties where they started off as a few dozen people having conversations for a few days. And a lot of those folks were people who had come to travel and studied and then like, Hey, I'm also a scientist.

And his holiness the Dalai Lama is well known for even as a teenager, being really interested in microscopes and everything about Western science. He's just got this incredibly curious mind. So, he started hosting these conferences, these conversations, and then those relationships started building bigger conferences happened. So, we have people like Richie Davidson up in Madison, Wisconsin, who's very well known for doing deep, deep work as a researcher, but working, studying the minds of monastics and this scientific research into what happens when you meditate, what happens when average folks meditate, what happens when experts meditate. And in order to try to help those who aren't already involved and sort of espouse in Buddhism to see some of the benefits of the meditation and mindfulness practices. And then we have on Jon Kabat-Zinn, who I'm sure some of you are familiar with, who created Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction.

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And so Jon Kabat-Zinn was already a scientist. He was a botanist in any case, I think medicine because he was working in the Department of Medicine at UMass in Worcester, Massachusetts. And by the late seventies had started to create this program because he had a deep practice himself. He had studied with Master Seung-sahn, who's a Korean Zen master, my own teacher Thích Nhất Hạnh he studied with quite a bit, and he also studied quite a bit with folks, Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein, these folks who came and created the Insight Meditation Society, having done a lot of the Theravada practices studied in Burma and India. And so, he had a deep practice and saw that this practice really helps deal with things like pain that Western medicine doesn't have a whole lot of capacity with. What if I try to find a way to teach what I've learned in these Buddhist spaces, but in 1979 to mostly non-Buddhist people who were often very close to anything other than their own traditions, and most were Jewish and Christian.

So, he very intentionally created this to be even more modernized to take the practices and to present them without the religious context. But he himself was deeply, deeply practiced in Buddhism, Buddhist methodologies. So, this last bit, I just wanted to bring in the word secularism. We also heard terms secular mindfulness, which is meant to be like, yes, and we had the religious and taken out of it. And part of why I did a very deep dive into this was like, I think there's more to it than just that it's not religious. But secularism as a movement grew out of the social and intellectual separation of religion from public life that grew up, especially in Protestant culture or in western European culture, to try to quell some of the wars between Catholics and Protestants. And so, you could say some good intention there, but the idea that you can separate one's personal, private experience of religion from what's happening on a public level only makes sense in a very few contexts like Protestantism. It's not universal.

But this mentality then sort of became wedded with a lot of the colonial projects that were happening around the world. So, that as we saw there was this people needing to defend and use scientific terms to defend their traditions because the epistemologies, the ways that those in power were teaching things was based on the rational scientific, western European ways of knowing, ways of understanding, ways of creating information. And so, some people think of a secularism as being tied to religious freedom. And in some ways there was an impetus at the beginning of the movement of secularism to have less violence, and therefore some types of freedom. But there's always been some part of secularism that the state has actually sought to control, how people practice their religions. And then when you put that into a colonial project, it's had some pretty disastrous results. And there's even what's known as the Secularization Thesis, which predicted that eventually secularism, the rational scientific take on things, Western scientific take on things would inevitably create for the decline of all religion because clearly Western sciences are superior.

And they often saw uncivilized cultures and religions as those who weren't completely absorbed or sort of buying into a secular approach. Now, there's a lot of folks writing these days about post-secularism because clearly that thesis has not proven to be true. Religion is not dying out, and there's more and more awareness how deeply culturally arrogant, deeply harmful so many of these perspectives have been, which is not to say that knowing that there's anything wrong with taking a rationalist and materialist perspective on things, but just to remember, it's only one of many. It's really important. And so, much of what passes as secularism is still really based on colonial or orientalist kind of views. And so, it's a lot of big words and a lot of concepts. And again, I wanted to really parse this out for myself because I was like, why does some of this feel really icky? And as a white person myself, my ancestors were part of forming these things.

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So, I also feel some personal responsibility to learn how to not perpetuate some of the really harmful things that have been part of all sorts of aspects, including Buddhism, which has been what I've given my life too for a few decades. So at this point, can you just take a moment or two and is there a part in your body that feels okay to tune into and just see for yourself, this is kind of a lot of information. Did that cause any shifts in your experience, in your body and your mind? Are there threads of thought that are still kind of going, what was that? Or that was too much? Or just what kind of state is your nervous system in? How's the quality of the mind and the body? Some of this may be your own people's history in different ways than mine, or similar ways to my own. This may be touching on some painful things or some frustrating and confusing things.

That's all welcome. So, I think this is the last slide. Yeah, hopefully that gave you just a moment of pause and grounding. So, I wanted to end with just saying that Buddhism is still in motion. Nothing is complete. Buddhism is still growing and changing in Asia. It is still traveling in many directions. And so, today there are tons of vast work communities that still bring monastics trained in Asia to wherever their communities are living in the rest of the world. I know when I was in Plum Village in Blue Cliff Monasteries, about 80%, well, 80% had Vietnamese roots, and about 60% were born and raised in Vietnam.

Now, that wasn't so much the community calling folks over because it didn't, well, there's many reasons. But that was, again, because of communism, Thích Nhất Hạnh's type of Buddhism wasn't the official state Buddhism. And so, there was religious persecution there. So, for people born and raised in Vietnam who wanted to study with this great Vietnamese master, they actually had to leave the country to do this. So, there's still all sorts of complications and challenges and gosh, so much dedication to keep this beautiful tradition alive. And then you have organizations like Fo Guang Shan, Tzu Chi Foundation, Dharma Drum, they're all based in Taiwan who have spread across the globe. They run universities, they run fantastic humanitarian organizations, and they're still very much rooted in Asia, and they are global movements. Soka Gakkai is one of the largest Buddhist organizations in the world based in pure land practice from Japan. They chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, part of the Lotus Sutra, and so you may know that Tina Turner and a number of celebrities who have practiced this.

I think it became popular more in the eighties. And so, to just yeah, it's rooted in Asia, but there's also the ways that Buddhism is growing elsewhere in the world. It's also influencing how things are continuing to grow in Asia. I know when I was at the monastery, a number of folks that I met from Hong Kong had taken an MBSR course because they were raised atheist. They took an MBSR course, they got in touch with Plum Village, they got in touch with Tibetan teachers. That's what they were practicing in Hong Kong. They weren't necessarily connected to a Chinese lineage of Buddhism. But global systems of information education are just making all these really interesting developments and changes. And so, purely in traditions that focus on chanting, ceremony and devotion are still the most popular forms of Buddhism in the world today. The focusing just on meditation is still this very small sect, even though it has become much more popular. And then many forms of Buddhism travel in all directions, and they'll continue to travel in all directions in the future.

Lauren Brown:

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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