

MindFIT Podcast – Cultural Appropriation and Appreciative Knowledge: A Conversation on Mindfulness & Yoga 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.

Lauren Brown:

All right, so hello and welcome to our MindFIT lecture series. For those folks I haven't met yet, my name is Lauren Brown, and I'm the Mindfulness, Meditation and Yoga Program Coordinator for the Division of Student Life here at the University of Toronto. I am very excited to introduce today our amazing panel of speakers.

Lauren Brown:

First up is Dr. Jenny Bright, who holds a PhD in Tibetan Buddhism and medicine. She works as a spiritual care clinician in the Intensive Care Unit at Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto, and teaches courses in Buddhism and psychotherapy at Emmanuel College in the Master of Pastoral Studies program and in the Buddhism, Psychology, and Mental Health minor at the University of Toronto, and is also a registered psychotherapist. Jenny's spiritual community is the Toronto Buddhist Church, where she serves as a member of the executive board of directors.

Lauren Brown:

We also have Shehla Khan, who has been teaching yoga for over 15 years. Along with classes and workshops, she also teaches yoga philosophy and yoga therapy. Shehla is the lead trainer for the Classical Yoga Teacher Training Certificate at George Brown College, and her teachings are informed by her experience in serving racialized women from African, Black, Caribbean, Latin, and South Asian communities, and one-on-one yoga therapy in community health clinics. She is also the facilitator for the Classical Yoga program that runs until, I believe, March 1st at the Multi-Faith Centre here at U of T.

Lauren Brown:

We're also joined by Melina Bondy, who began meditation and Dharma practice in 2003 in both Plum Village and Vipassana traditions, eventually taking their monastic vows under the Vietnamese peace activist and Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh in 2012. Melina returned to lay life in 2021, and is currently training in the Buddhist Spiritual Care program at the University of Toronto.

Lauren Brown:

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But up first, we have two undergraduate students. First, Hela Kalicharran, a fifth year student at U of T, pursuing a major in Buddhist Studies and minors in Buddhism, Psychology and Mental Health, and Indigenous Studies. She is a yoga and mindfulness facilitator in the Mindful Moments program here at U of T, and a program assistant for the Multi-Faith Centre.

Lauren Brown:

And last but not least, Angelica Lozada, a fifth year student pursuing a double major in East Asian Studies and Religion. She is also an Assistant Program Coordinator at the Multi-Faith Center, and a graduate of the Interfaith Certificate program, and currently assists in the Interfaith Leadership Certificate program.

Lauren Brown:

So, welcome everyone. I will now hand things over to Hela, who will be recording our session and opening our event with a land acknowledgement.

Hela Kalicharran:

Hi, everyone. Welcome. I'd like to acknowledge this 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 the home to many Indigenous peoples from across Turtle Island, and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

Hela Kalicharran:

Before we begin the lecture, I ask that you hold all of your questions until the end, as we will have a short Q&A period. I'm going to start by offering a couple different definitions for cultural appropriation, just to keep in mind that the definition can encompass more than what I share here, so I encourage you to actively think about what this might mean for you as we discuss, so please make sure.

Hela Kalicharran:

Cultural appropriation is often defined as the taking from the culture that is not your own of intellectual property or artifacts, history, and ways of knowing. Cases of cultural appropriation compromise a variety of situations and phenomenon. Cases of cultural appropriation compromise 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. Cultural appropriation is the theft of sacred items or practices, while simultaneously profiting from their misuse.

Hela Kalicharran:

So, according to Lalonde, there are three underpinning factors of cultural appropriation. First, there is non-recognition, which entails rendering a marginalized group voiceless and ignoring their claim to property, tangible or intangible. Second, there is mis-recognition, occurring when a marginalized population is subjected to stereotyping, which impacts how others view them and how group members perceive them. Third, exploitation, is the actions taken which benefit the appropriator, while harming the group members who had their ethnic property taken.

Hela Kalicharran:

According to Rogers, there are four types of cultural appropriation. Firstly, there is cultural exchange, the reciprocal exchange of symbols, artifacts, rituals, genres and/or technologies between cultures with roughly equal level of power. There is cultural dominance, the use of elements of a dominant culture by members of a subordinated culture in a context in which the dominant culture has been imposed onto the subordinated culture, including appropriations that enact resistance. Thirdly, there is cultural exploitation, the appropriation of elements of a subordinated culture by a dominant culture without substantiated reciprocity, permission, and or compensation. And lastly, there is transculturation, cultural elements created from and/or by multiple cultures, such that identification of a single or origination culture is problematic. For example, multiple cultural appropriation structured in the dynamics of globalization and transnational capitalism, creating hybrid forms.

Hela Kalicharran:

So today, we're going to be talking about more specifically cultural appropriation within yoga and mindfulness spaces. So to start, I'll be sharing this quote, "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." So, in the West, there has been an emphasis on a simplified Asana practice, which is just part of the yoga practice which focuses on physical postures, as well as a secular mindfulness practice, which are used as therapeutic interventions, rather than a practice for a spiritual awakening. And we actually touched on this in one of Dr. Bright's classes, that the initial practice of mindfulness was never meant to be used as a therapeutic intervention, or it can be argued that it was never intended to be used in this capacity.

Hela Kalicharran:

However, there are benefits to this, and Western adaptations have made these practices more accessible to a wider variety of practitioners that have been able to benefit from them. In the West, yoga is perceived as a form of fitness to improve strength, flexibility, and overall wellbeing, and mindfulness is often used as a tool for stress reduction. The practice of yoga and mindfulness itself is not cultural appropriation. However, we risk cultural appropriation when we do not acknowledge the religious origins of the practice, and the varying aspects of a yoga and mindfulness practice. I'm going to hand it over to Angelica.

Angelica Lozada:

All right, hello everyone. So I'm just going to be giving a very brief little lecture on appreciative knowledge to supplement what Hela has just shared. So, one definition that can be applied to the term appreciative knowledge is an accurate and positive knowledge one holds about a worldview, in contrast to inaccurate or selective negative knowledge. Now, this is also called interfaith literacy, and although religious literacy might begin with the basic texts 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.

Angelica Lozada:

This is a quotation I provided from Patel and Meyer, and these are two scholars that have done a lot of research on the topic of appreciative knowledge and interfaith literacy, so if you want to learn just a bit more about it, I definitely recommend looking at those scholars. "And so as such, engaging in appreciative knowledge requires one to recognize the value of diverse traditions in our society, as well as their contributions, and additionally requires one to have an empathetic understanding of the traditions they encounter, thereby perceiving the tradition as if one is looking at it from an insider's perspective. And lastly, one must make an effort to seek out information on diverse traditions, with the overarching goal of wanting to work effectively with these different communities."

Angelica Lozada:

Now, another way of understanding appreciative knowledge is identifying it as a type of learning that moves away from seeing things in a purely academic manner, with academic knowledge as that which you can find in either a textbook or able to search up online. Appreciative knowledge or learning requires an intentional interaction between the person or object they're interacting with. And so a way to visualize this difference is to think of the different types of knowledge acquired when visiting an art gallery or even a museum. So on one hand, one may gain general or rather academic knowledge from an information card that they find, but on a deeper level, one can engage with the art itself from a feelings perspective, and evoke knowledge about the work without having to rely with what is found on its description card.

Angelica Lozada:

And in general, we can understand cultural appreciation as wanting to learn and understand a cultural or religious tradition as a way to broaden our own perspective of the world, and connect with others on a cross-cultural level. Appreciative knowledge can then also be seen as the equivalent of cultural or religious appreciation. Since one is not necessarily just reading facts about a tradition or culture, we're rather actively engaging with its members to understand their culture or tradition on a more personal level. The key aspect in this engagement is listening to and striking up conversation with the stories they choose to share with you.

Angelica Lozada:

Now, it is also worth emphasizing that engaging also requires an exchange. And so when someone shares their culture or tradition with you, you must be equally open to sharing your own culture or tradition, so that the connection between both parties is further solidified, and this would be known as interfaith or intercultural dialogue. And yes, so that concludes my presentation, and I believe now we are moving on to hearing from our panelists.

Lauren Brown:

Thank you, Angelica. Yes, let's hand things over to Dr. Bright.

Dr. Jenny Bright:

Okay, thank you very much. Thanks for the introduction. Thank you Angelica and Hela for those wonderful slides, and a wonderful introduction to this topic. So, it's so helpful too to lay the groundwork of what are inappropriate ways, what is cultural appropriation, but then what is appreciative knowledge? And so I really appreciate that. I'll talk a little bit about myself and my personal journey of these things. I am a Western convert to Buddhism, so I've had to think through a lot of these things over the years. I'll get back to that a little bit, but first I'm just going to say a few words, because I teach these things, about some of the differences of mindfulness and Buddhism. And they're both practices that I use, I do Buddhist meditation, I've done some Tibetan tantric practices for over 20 years. The Buddhist school I belong to now, Jodo Shinshu, we don't actually have, really, a meditation tradition, so I still do the Tibetan one a bit. And I also use mindfulness as well, in more of its secular context, particularly in a clinical setting.

Dr. Jenny Bright:

But I just want to speak a bit about what the differences are between Buddhism and mindfulness, just so that we can be respectful of where mindfulness is coming from. And that is that, as Hela sort of talked about, and as she gathered from one of her classes with me, is that meditation in Buddhism has a different aim than mindfulness. And the end goal for Buddhist meditation is to meditate, it's not therapeutic, so to speak, although in a larger sense one might argue, but in the sense that it's meant to achieve awakening. It has a soteriological purpose, and soteriological refers to... It's a religious study word that refers to how one gains their salvation, or their liberation, or their freedom, or something like this.

Dr. Jenny Bright:

And so according to Buddhist thought, meditation was typically, actually, traditionally for people who are emotionally mentally stable, who had already been doing a lot of Buddhist practices for many years, and who were also aware and knowledgeable of Buddhist theology or Buddhist religious doctrines and principles and thing like this. And so it was set within an ethical context of Buddhism. And so that is the goal, is eventually it's to become awake or at least to have little moments of awake in our lives.

Dr. Jenny Bright:

Whereas in mindfulness, which of course, mindfulness is a really neat story. It was from early pioneers like Jon Kabat-Zinn and other thinkers who engaged with Buddhist practices, who actually met with Buddhist masters and became quite knowledgeable of Buddhism. And they had this very clever idea, really, and they thought, "I wonder if we could extract these mindfulness or these meditation practices?" I can't go into it at this time, I don't have all of the time to talk, but that is to say that they extracted, so to speak, some of the core, four foundations of mindfulness, which is attention to the body, attention to feeling and sensation, attention to the mind, and then finally, attention to intellectual or moral subjects, which is usually like religious dharma.

Dr. Jenny Bright:

And so he extracted this, and took it out, and said, "We want to make this available for non-Buddhists, we want to make this available for everybody." And so mindfulness became a separate therapeutic practice, which I use, which I teach, and which has many benefits. I'm working on some bigger project about spiritually integrated mindfulness, and this is the idea that whatever your spiritual religious background, whether you're Christian or Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist or atheist or whatever your background is, is that you can actually set up a moral and values framework around a mindfulness practice.

Dr. Jenny Bright:

And so this is why it's important. My point in this is that it's important to recognize that while mindfulness does derive from Buddhism, I don't want to say it's not Buddhist, but it's not directly Buddhist, if you understand. So mindfulness is not Buddhism, or mindfulness is not the same as Buddhist meditation. They're related, in a sense, and one derives from the other.

Speaker 5:

[inaudible 00:17:09].

Dr. Jenny Bright:

This isn't something that's important to keep-

Speaker 5:

[inaudible 00:17:13].

Dr. Jenny Bright:

... in mind. Oh, somebody's got their sound on.

Speaker 5:

[inaudible 00:17:18].

Dr. Jenny Bright:

So I think that it's just good to know the history of this, and there are other issues like Orientalism, and colonialism, and who is mindfulness for? Who is mindfulness accessible for? It has ableist assumptions sometimes. So, while mindfulness is a really excellent tool, and a really great technique, it's not for everybody, just as Buddhist meditation is not necessarily for everybody.

Dr. Jenny Bright:

So, I was going to say, I appreciate them both. I use them both in different settings and for different purposes. And it's been tricky, and I'll talk a bit about my personal journey, as originally, I did my PhD, as was mentioned, in Tibetan medicine and Buddhism. I spent many years in India and then Tibet, I learned to speak Tibet, and read and write Tibet, and all of these things. And I was deeply appreciative of their culture, and of the medical tradition, and I thought it was really brilliant. And there was an equal exchange of my culture and their culture, and it was really wonderful experiences.

Dr. Jenny Bright:

But over time, I grew really uncomfortable with this idea that I was earning a doctorate, and becoming an expert of other people's knowledge. And it started to feel more and more just uncomfortable and icky, because it was hard for me to pass myself off of an expert of somebody else's knowledge. Obviously I gave them credit, I didn't pretend that I invented Tibetan medicine or something like this, but more and more, it seems strange to be studying another people. And I tried to make my dissertation as much about us and them, I studied Western endocrinology, my dissertation is about tantric notions of the body used to understand hormones in a Tibetan context, medical context. And so I really went into Western and I really picked apart, I did my best to make the dissertation about a cultural exchange, but inevitably, it did feel uncomfortable to be an expert of somebody else's knowledge.

Dr. Jenny Bright:

And so I think that was what might have been the final straw, where I actually left the academic study of religion, and I moved into spiritual care, and into studying Buddhist theology, because that was a more comfortable place for me to engage in ideas of right relations. And so that's the journey I took. The funny thing is I do belong to a Buddhist temple, but we don't meditate so much. And that's something to keep in mind too, is that traditionally, most Buddhists did not actually meditate. This was typically for the monastic elite, or yogis and yoginis. Your average layperson, also even your average monastic, did not necessarily have a meditation practice. And for Pure Land Buddhists, which I'm one of them, which is a huge part of Mahayana Buddhism, there's millions and millions of Amitabha, Pure Land Buddhists, don't meditate. So that's something to keep in mind, meditation certainly does not define Buddhism. With that, thank you very much for your kind attention, and I would be pleased to hear our next speaker.

Lauren Brown:

Thank you Jenny, so much. And Shehla, will you be kind enough to share your wisdom with the group next?

Shehla Khan:

Hello, hello everyone. That was so insightful to hear, Dr. Jenny, such an experience. My name is Shehla Khan, and I'm coming in, just going to share a little bit of my experience with teaching yoga and it's confusing. So just to start by definition of yoga, and how... I'm sure you have looked up yoga, at this point, everybody has seen or done some yoga classes. And appropriation in yoga is really big. So I really don't even know where to begin. Just by saying that, we must... Just to share a little definition, and that's one of the definition of yoga.

Shehla Khan:

And so I really appreciate the definition that Hela was sharing in the slides about what cultural appropriation is, and what cultural appreciation is. And one of the slide was knowing the spiritual context and knowing the spiritual definition. And yoga has many definition. And of course, just to locate myself, I'm coming from a Northwestern part of South Asia, so we have our own tradition. Yoga belongs to just not... And it's not an Indian yoga system, because India is very small as compared to how it used to be. So, it's a South Asian practice. So I'm locating myself in more of the Kashmir region. So Kashmir, which is borders of Pakistan and India, okay? It's one of, I don't know, to my knowledge, so far as I know, it's one of the oldest... You can date it, people date it as far back as Bronze Age, whatever that is in numbers. But it started from Indus River Valley civilization.

Shehla Khan:

So it is tied to our religion, and not just the main religion that we hear of in South Asia, Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism. And also there's no such thing as Hinduism, because there's orthodox schools and non-orthodox schools, as well as indigenous teachings of this land. And they all ascribe to yoga, all of them. Unless they were coming from more of a later religion that were came in, such as Islam came in, Christianity came in, and so on and so forth. So one of the ways to look at it is that it is intimately tied, it cannot be separated from religion. And when we look at yoga, it's pretty much the spiritual concepts are completely dropped, and they're appropriated, which really hurts deeply to, especially, the Hindus, or the people who worship deity worshipping. So it used to hit me really hard when I used to see these images of gods and goddesses. They're still around on t-shirts and so on.

Shehla Khan:

So recognizing the history, and that's where my work began. Personally, a little bit about my history, I've been practicing more so in a religious classical yoga, which is a spiritual religious practice. So one of the things people say, "Oh, yoga's not a religion." So I used to joke about, now I straight up say it, that it depends who you're speaking to. Because it is a religion. It is taught very intimately to a religion. So I am

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embedded in a classical yoga, which is tied to religion. And yoga, as we see it as a physical practice, was not part of it.

Shehla Khan:

The main reason we practice yoga had many different practices. And like Dr. Jenny was saying, that it was about spiritual awakening. In yoga tradition, the Himalayan tradition, which is tied to a non-orthodox religion of more of a Shaivism, Tantrism. It's about recognizing yourself. So they have a saying in Himalayan tradition, is that as human beings, we fall asleep. And they came up with a system that allow us to wake up, and hence that's considered spiritual awakening.

Shehla Khan:

And physical yoga was not even... To this day, a lot of people don't even attach the yoga to the physical yoga practice. They call it just Hatha, or they're practicing body release. So yoga is not tied, you can go to a yoga class and never even... Even breathing, and meditations, and all that stuff was... And again, meditation is different words they use for meditation.

Shehla Khan:

That's one thing, so recognizing history. So, some of the work that I do, both in my teacher trainings and workshop, we cannot cover it all, but just recognizing that it's a vast tradition. And this just allows us to open up to the sacred knowledge, because it is considered a sacred indigenous knowledge of this land. So just appreciating that and going from there.

Shehla Khan:

Another thing, one of the things that I like to share is just the fact that how intimately it's tied to our religion. You may have heard of a text called Bhagavad Gita, and each chapter of the Bhagavad Gita has a name Yoga. Each chapter is called Yoga. So again, going back to how intimately it's tied with the spiritual... Religious, not even spiritual, religious texts of this land and beyond.

Shehla Khan:

And just appropriating, so some of the work me and my colleagues now, it's amazing how this time after... I've been doing this for over 15 now... My son is 17, so almost 20 years, but it's about time now we're recognizing and the wheels are turning. One of the symbol that's been appropriated a lot is the Om symbol, you may have seen, which is a religious symbol. So again, going back to understanding and appreciating, rather than... Classic example is we all see this on t-shirts, or on yoga mats, which is considered really offensive to be written on the floor or a mat where you've... , it's quite disrespectful.

Shehla Khan:

So, one of the ways my work has gone into is just education and conversation. And it's just because it's become an industry, and that's what we have to step away from. So panels like these, talking, and opening up conversation really allow us to go towards appreciating this knowledge. So another thing, I do use yoga in a secular way. So movement as a rehab, and I specialize in brain injury, so I do use yoga and breathing exercises, the physical yoga, so the physical form of yoga, the Hatha yoga, as a therapeutics, because it does have many benefits, and it does make it accessible to a lot of people.

Shehla Khan:

And because yoga came and developed in a huge landscape, it honors everyone's spirituality. So even though you are practicing physical practices, even if you're not... It is straight up, this is how I was taught, so I bring in my teachers' teachings of... Eventually down the road, we do ask, what is your spiritual practice? There's no beating around it, you just ask it. Whatever it is, we bring that into, at least the therapeutic way I practice and I teach, we bring it in and incorporate it. And I'm just going to quote what my teacher needs to say, that physical and the mental benefits we gain from our practices are usually the side effects, and great side effects. They're not the focus; they never were. And as a traditionalist coming, again, I don't even know what that means, but it's someone who sticking to more of a Vedas, which is the Orthodox teaching, meaning they are embedded in religious Hindu, more so Hindu Orthodox, I'm doing air quotes because it's considered, those are the Vedic Hindu, is to honor that system.

Shehla Khan:

And those are the side effects. They were never the aim and they never will be the aim. It may happen, it may not happen. However, spiritual awakening is something that will happen. That is the focus and you start up from there.

Shehla Khan:

I'm going to finish it off, I know I'm sort of going so fast, yeah? Because I get so excited about this stuff. One of the ways, so if you look at yoga and how it was developed, yoga, when I'm saying yoga, like the whole system of yoga, which has mindfulness, breathing, and Tantric practices, which are the more indigenous practices, which uses a lot of different techniques to wake us up, and move away from... Bring us back to ourself, is that pretty much all the systems are developed on this principle that we're a multi-layered being, okay?

Shehla Khan:

I was taught as a child, so I grew up with this tradition, and it's sort of inverted in the West that I see. So the inversion comes from, yes, you have a body, you have mental layer, energetic layer, but you're a spiritual being. So you start off in how I was taught in the East, growing up, is that you start off recognizing your spiritual layers, and then honoring the rest. And the same model, again, is sort of inverted, I see here, that it's all about body, and attending to the body because it's been taught across the board. I'm at few different yoga studios across the North America and a few places in Europe, and

it's always the body, because they say bodies grow, so you're more attached to it. It's because we have conditioned to become attached to it, since we're pretty young. So it's about conditioning, it's not because it's grosser, that you could feel the body. And then mental, emotional. But we have disconnected.

Shehla Khan:

So it's always, I see this, this inversion of really attending to the body, and just focusing on the body relaxation, mental relaxation. And very seldom that we go deeper into what the purpose of... According to this tradition of yoga that I'm speaking about, the older tradition, the purpose is to wake up and to remember who we are. So, that is my sharing. I know it's a bit too much, but I'll be sticking around for questions.

Lauren Brown:

Shehla, thank you... Sorry Shehla, thank you so much and I'm glad you're excited, and I'm glad you speak so passionately about yoga and your life's work. I'd like to hand things over to Melina next to hear their words of wisdom.

Melina Bondy:

Thank you very much. I don't know about the wisdom, but I'm happy to share experience, for sure. Hi everybody. Can you hear me okay? Yeah. So as was shared, a big part of what my journey has been has centered around nine years spent in monastic robes. But even before life within a fairly traditional Vietnamese Buddhist community, the question of cultural appropriation was actually really alive for me. In my early twenties, I remember other friends getting into yoga and recognizing myself as a European descended settler white person was like, "Any white people doing yoga, it's appropriation, I'm not going to do it." I was like, "I don't see how this is not going to be really messy." And then over time, life changes. And then I can't remember actually how it happened, but I think I actually was in a class, and I was like, "This is amazing. Okay, there must be a way to do this respectfully."

Melina Bondy:

And so, I actually, even before I was drawn into the Dharma or Buddhism, I had actually spent about six months in a yoga ashram, and had done some more traditional practice because I thought, "Okay, if I'm going to enjoy this, and get interested in it, I want to not just do the physical postures." And there was philosophy, and chanting, and devotion, and some of it landed really well, and some of it I was like, "What am I doing?" But it just felt really important to meet a holistic picture and experience, and to not just follow along with what sort of class pack that you could buy at a local studio kind of thing.

Melina Bondy:

And so around a similar time, I found a poem by Thich Nhat Hanh on the internet, and I was just blown away, and it was like a magnet drew me in. And again, I was like, "Oh, white people doing Buddhism. I

don't know how good... That's going to have a lot of appropriation." For the bits that I had seen from the outside, I hadn't recognized anything, and I didn't know enough to know where to look. But that's how I came in. And yet, like I said, it was like this magnet drew me in. And I just started reading and reading and reading, and crying a lot because I was so touched. And eventually, I remember telling this friend, "I don't know why I keep having these thoughts that I want to ordain, but I don't even know what a monastic is! I'm going to go on this retreat and get it out of my system, because there's no way I would ever actually do that. I don't know even what this is." But there is something very deep that called me from the start.

Melina Bondy:

And so I did start going on retreats, and eventually spent time at Plum Village in the home monastery, the headquarters of Thich Nhat Hanh's tradition and community, and eventually did ordain as a monastic. And even at that point it was like, how can I engage respectfully with this tradition? Because that's what I've come to understand, that, at least how I approach my own journey of where is appropriation? Where is appreciation? Where is the reverence? Where is the relationship? Is there a relationship? Is there reverence and honoring? And if there isn't, it is pretty hard to not have some degree of either appropriation or extraction.

Melina Bondy:

And so I had shaved head, I had no personal money, I gave up all my belongings, I wore a brown robe for nine years. It was a fairly traditional community. And so, in living there, I really felt steeped and soaked in the tradition. And even now, I have moments where I have to check myself, of is how I'm sharing or understanding the dharma coming from reverence? Is it coming from entitlement? Where is the relationship? Is there someone I can check in with? Do I have relationships with people that are more steeped than I am, and that I can... And not out of fear, but really, again, out of this honoring and this love. Is their love for the tradition? If there isn't love, then again, it's really easy to appropriate and exploit.

Melina Bondy:

So, I could say so much more about details, but I'm in this interesting position now where most of my dharma and mindfulness experience has come through a quite traditional path. And then a few years ago, I left. Realized that, a little too narrow to just be in the one place for me. And yet, it was also a huge heartbreak, because my adoration and my commitment to the path and the tradition and the practice is still 100% there, just I'm finding a new form, and now I'm meeting... I knew that there was this whole mindfulness thing, that it's a big business. But I really, in some ways, I'm so grateful that I didn't even have much exposure to it. And now I'm sorting out how do I keep my own practice, and my own honoring, and my own relationships within a more traditional space? And yet I keep having images of these jewels in my hands, I've literally received such, such precious practice and teachings that I have felt, and I have been invited to share and teach. But at every step there's this question of how am I doing it respectfully?

Melina Bondy:

And for me, that's part of my ballast or my anchor and my check-in. And I know I've met a lot of folks who are like, "Well, I don't want to walk around eggshells." And like, "Come on, it's not that big of a deal if I'm going to share this and that." And I just like to flip that around it's head of, there's the opportunity in this question of checking, where's our appreciation? Where's our appropriation? To just get clearer for myself, for ourselves, with like, "Oh, am I coming from reverence? Am I coming from something that's alive in my heart?" Especially when we're sharing things publicly.

Melina Bondy:

I know I've also done a fair bit of work around looking at whiteness, and unlearning whiteness, and how doing racial healing work within as part of my dharma, and working with friends of color, where we have created a bunch of things together. And so just this question of where is the power? Who's profiting? What's the relationship? It's so central. And with these years of pandemic and all the isolation, there's just so many ways that it's even harder to have, I think, good relationships, and embedded holistic engagement in practices that aren't necessarily from our own background. But it doesn't mean it's not possible.

Melina Bondy:

So I was so excited and honored to be invited here, although my first thought was, "We do not need me to pretend to be an expert." But I know that's not what you're asking me to do. And I do feel that this is very much my commitment, and I need to be engaged in this work. So that's why I wanted to come share, because I hope that I can share some of the passion for this question and process and journey, not as this obligation, but as it's actually part of a path of awakening. It's part of a path of understanding ourselves, better understanding our relationships. And it can even be interesting and fun, not just this like, "Ugh." Which, at least, a lot of white folks that I've met and worked with tend to have more of a... Or the fear of like, "Am I going to do something wrong?" Which has a seed of something very wholesome in it, and yet if it's just the fear, it's also not helping.

Melina Bondy:

So I always try to be someone who's like, this can be generative, this can be liberating, this can be wonderful, even though it's messy, because all of our life is messy, and if we're really engaging in any spiritual practice, it's going to be messy. So that's okay. Let it be part of the whole. So, thank you so much for having me and for having this series. And I'll pass it, I think... Yeah, I'll pass it back to our hosts, thank you.

Lauren Brown:

Thank you, Melina. And I think that that concept of this is really messy, boy does that resonate. It's a very complex and personal journey. I thank you so much for explaining and sharing your experience with it. And thank you for all of our panelists for sharing their experience navigating this important, and yet,

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challenging terrain that we are all certainly aware of moving towards our own... I liked how you said that, having our own moments of checking in with ourselves. Yeah.

Lauren Brown:

I would like to open the floor up to questions for all or for any of the panelists in particular. You can also message me privately on the chat if you would prefer to pose a question through that route, and I'll read it aloud. I think I can see everybody on the screen now. So if you do have a question, you can just pop on your camera or hand up or whatever works for you. Hela.

Hela Kalicharran:

I have a question for any of our wonderful panelists who feel inclined to answer. I'm just wondering if you choose to acknowledge religious context when facilitating or practicing in secular spaces. And if you do, to what degree do you acknowledge the religious or spiritual origins of what you're sharing within secular spaces?

Dr. Jenny Bright:

I can venture an answer? That's a great question. It's funny, it's complicated for me because I work in spiritual care. I have the privilege and the honor to discuss with people their theology, their beliefs about the nature of God or the Buddha, the divine, the universe. So I get to talk about religious topics and spiritual topics, but sometimes I'm asked, with patients who might be really anxious or something's going on, if I could just go and practice some mindfulness with them, just do some grounding techniques or things like this. And in those situations, it's funny, I kind of go in as a multi-faith chaplain. A lot of patients aren't particularly religious or even spiritual. And so in those cases, and often there's sort of a purpose in me there, obviously they're often very distressed or things like this, and I do not bring up, "This is a Buddhist [Sanskrit 00:44:33]." I don't bring up all of the things that I talk about, I just sort of do secular mindfulness.

Dr. Jenny Bright:

Although I always do invite them, I always try to, even if they're not religious, to integrate something of their spirituality. So I always have a conversation with them first, I learn about them a little bit. And so I try to customize the mindfulness practice to their values or their worldview. Most people believe in something. They might say they believe in a higher power if they don't know what that is, or they believe that there's love in the universe, or things like this. And so I work around it that way. So it's a good question because no, I don't every time. Yeah.

Hela Kalicharran:

Thank you, Dr. Bright.

Lauren Brown:

Did anybody else want to share their perspective on Hela's question before I move to the next one?

Melina Bondy:

I can just say, I mostly am not in secular spaces, but similar to Dr. Bright, because I'm training in the hospitals also right now, if it's one-on-one, and brief, and there isn't really an interest, or there hasn't been part of our conversation already, I won't say like, "Yes, we're taking three deep breaths together, and this..." It takes longer to explain than just doing it. But if I'm doing anything public, I always do. And I'll just say to honor, I didn't make this up. This comes from a Buddhist tradition, even though you don't have to actually partake of it, but I want to understand where this comes from, in case you want to know more.

Melina Bondy:

Or I have a photo of my teacher here in the background of my Zoom all the time. But that's also partly I don't do a whole lot in overtly secular institutional spaces. And in part I'm committed to never not naming my teachers and my lineage. But it can be really simple, and small, and casual that I think works most places. It's like academia, name your sources. It's not actually a radical concept.

Lauren Brown:

I love that. Melina, thank you. We do have a question for Shehla in the chat. You spoke about the appropriation of Om. What does the symbol of Om actually mean, rooted in the context or tradition? Where can I learn more about this?

Shehla Khan:

So Om means... So I'm going to give you the religious meaning, which comes from the Vedas. I think chat is open to me, if not, and I'm not sure I can write it? Yeah. So this definition that I am sharing, it comes from Vedas, which literally means knowledge, and one sort of moreso where I start off for beginners what Om means. So it's a Sanskrit syllable, okay? So I also teach and know Sanskrit, so first letter in Sanskrit language is A, and the last letter is M. So it donates to part of you, so when you're traditionally chanting, or contemplating on the word or the mantra, we call it a mantra, of Om, it means I'm focusing or I'm putting my awareness or I'm contemplating on the part of the universe or part within me, if you have a tradition that you believe the God is within you or away from you, some kind of whatever divinity, whatever divine connection you have, or however you recognize this.

Shehla Khan:

So that's what it means, something that can be explained with language and also beyond language. So it's beyond A to M, that's what I'm contemplating on. So that's where the meaning begins. And then from the Vedas, it goes on to say that it is consciousness, you're waking, you are recognizing yourself in wakefulness, subconsciousness and beyond, and also connecting with the cosmic consciousness.

Shehla Khan:

So that's the full mantra of Om, and also the symbol of the Om that we see that goes on... We can spend few hours on just discussing on the whole symbol, and it's recognizing that I am beyond all that, which also means liberation, if that's what it means, or waking up, depending on which South Asian religion is using that Om. So I will source the... I could be wrong with the spelling, because I'm just translating it in my head, Mandukya Upanishad, if you look up, it would be... Which also, there goes my passion, which is also a name of a mat, prime example of appropriating religion, Mandukya Upanishad, which is from the Vedas, which you can find out more. And I personally recommend the writer, which speaks very beautifully, and he describes everything, Eknath Easwaran. Okay? So he is a scholar, and he write beautifully, and you can go and find it in his translation of Upanishads, more about the meaning of the Om.

Lauren Brown:

Thank you, Shehla, thank you for the resources as well. I'd like to say thank you so much to everybody who's been on the panel today; to Hela, Angelica, Jenny, Shehla, and Melina. Thank you for your thoughtful comments this evening. And on behalf of MindFIT, the Multi-Faith Center, and the Division of Student Life at the University of Toronto, thank you to everybody who attended today. We have a session again next week... No, not next week, we're on reading week, one week later with Dr. Norman Farb from University of Toronto, Mississauga, and he will be talking about his research in the area of mindfulness, neuroscience, and emotion.

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.