

## Subaltern Speaks Season 2, Episode 3 Transcript

**Yasmin:** Hello, everyone. For the new listeners, welcome to Subaltern Speaks, a podcast created by the multi-faith center at the University of Toronto for spiritual study and practice where we explore the legacies of colonialism across religions and Spiritualities of colonized peoples, otherwise known as the subaltern in post-colonial studies. My name is Yasmin and I'm so excited to be back again with you for the third episode of season two of Subaltern Speaks. In this episode, we will explore how the concept of mindfulness has its origins in Buddhism. We will explore why and how mindfulness has become more detached from Buddhism in order to make it more appealing and marketable, and how this trend has marginalized Asian Buddhist from popular perceptions of Buddhism. To speak on these topics with us today, we have a special guest in store for you, professor Jeff Wilson.

He's a professor of religious studies and East Asian studies at Renison University College at the University of Waterloo. He has written numerous books and articles about the interaction of Buddhism and various aspects of North American culture, most notably *Mindful America*, *The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture* and *Dixie Dharma: Inside a Buddhist Temple in the American South*. Hi, Professor Wilson. How are you doing today?

**Professor Wilson:** I'm well. Thank you, Yasmin. It's an honor to be invited to speak with you here today.

**Yasmin:** Same as well. Thank you for putting your time, your valuable time to join us for this very important conversation that gets fairly talked about in the popular media. Just before we begin, I wanted to acknowledge that our podcast is called Subaltern Speaks. And you self-identify as a white person as a white man, so I was wondering how do you position yourself in this conversation about Buddhism in decolonialism basically? If you could give us a little background into that.

**Professor Wilson:** Thank you. Yeah, I'd be happy to do so. I want to clarify, actually, I don't personally self-identify as a white man, rather that's a social label, which it is appropriate to apply to myself. I was influenced by Noel Ignatiev and others working on whiteness in the 1990s and afterwards, and I reject the idea of whiteness as a personal identifier. I don't find it to be terribly useful, interesting, or politically appropriate. But it's certainly appropriate to apply to myself as a demographic label because I am a person of European ancestral heritage. And I do receive all of the privileges that come along with that in a society, which is based on white supremacy as unfortunately Canadian and North American side in general are.

So therefore I'm certainly not a person who would be identified as a subaltern, being male, being a person identified as white, being someone from middle

class background, really a person who has many socially provided privileges and a few, if any disadvantages here. However, I am a person who studies race, ethnicity, culture, and other topics, which are directly related to this idea of the subaltern the marginalized. And I'm someone who's highly concerned with the ways in which different populations, particularly Buddhist populations have been marginalized in North American society and in the process of Buddhism coming to the West and becoming part of Western culture. That's something that's often celebrated as a diversification and so on. And yet there's some darker sides to this process as well because yes, Buddhism has come to be a popular mindfulness as an enormous phenomenon and among other things, the gigantic industry.

But there's also a process whereby the Buddhist cultures originated in Asia who developed and fostered and transmitted mindfulness and other aspects of Buddhist culture for so many centuries, indeed millennia. They tend to get sidelined and either put into very particular boxes or even erased and hidden entirely in the process of mindfulness becoming, "Mainstream." So since that's a phenomenon that is concerning to me, and one of which I've developed considerable research, that's why I'm here as a speaker with you today.

**Yasmin:**

Yes. I mean, you couldn't have said it any better. I mean, I personally believe that white people in general can be great allies to the cause of the decolonization, decolonizing not only like our institutions, but also our mindsets. Before we begin I think it is important to discuss how Buddhism and related practices like mindfulness came to the West from Asia in the first place. As we already know, mindfulness, as we presented in our popular culture today is a product of modern Buddhism in the last century. However, I want to ask you, what are the historical roots of mindfulness in Buddhist traditions of Asia? Has mindfulness and meditation always been important practices for lay Buddhist?

**Professor Wilson:**

So mindfulness has always had an important role to play in Buddhism. Something we talk about in Buddhism is the noble eightfold path for example, and one of the eight steps on that path, which is the path of sort of the process of disentangling ourselves from our egos, from our ignorance and from our misapprehension of the world, and thereby developing wisdom, compassion, and working towards awakening or what we sometimes call enlightenment. One of the steps on that path is right mindfulness. So we can see mindfulness embedded right there within the path for Buddhist. That said, mindfulness is something that is central to the Buddhist path, but mindfulness is also something which has primarily been reserved for the monastics. Those to say the monks and the nuns who are ordained, who live in separate communities of dedicated practice, who follow many special rules and are sort of the religious exemplars or ideals in the religion.

For them the eightfold path is very important and practice is designed to inculcates deep states of mindfulness. These are important, at least in theory. For the great mass of people though, they're lay people, and for them the teachings on mindfulness tend to be rather different. The idea of doing some

sort of intensive meditation that deeply inculcates states of mindfulness and awareness, these are things that were not expected of the average Buddhist or the average person in society. Right? The average person is someone who has to work, has to labor. And their role in Buddhism was to follow some basic Buddhist morality and especially to provide material and other forms of support to that smaller monastic community, that then was sort of like the really sort of hardcore people working on the deepest aspects of the Buddhist path.

By doing so they gave inspiration to others. They were able to teach the lay people about Buddhism and help them to the extent possible begin to disentangle themselves. But especially through their practices, including meditation practice, they generated enormous stores of merit, or what's sometimes called good karma, which then could be tapped into by lay people. So there's a symbiosis there. Mindfulness, intensive meditation based mindfulness practices were mostly for monks and nuns who were a small minority of people. And then symbiotically, while they did mindfulness and developed merit, they gave that to the laypeople who benefited in a secondary way or indirect way from those mindfulness practices. The average Buddhist walking around in a Buddhist country was not engaged in any sort of intensive meditation practice on a daily basis, not at all. This is a sort of a modern reimagination of what life would've been like.

And even amongst the amongst monks and nuns, honestly, intensive meditation practices were fairly rare. Much of monastic life is about ritual and following certain precepts and so on. And meditation specialists were just a certain class of, as I say, specialists within what we call the Sangha the community monks and nuns [crosstalk 00:09:47]. I do note that I haven't actually defined mindfulness, even though I've talked a lot about it. Maybe I should quickly say what this is and not assume [inaudible 00:09:56] understand it. So since you started by asking about the original Buddhist context, we should note that the word that we translate as mindfulness, most often the word we're referring to here is in the poly language, Sati and the [Sanskrit 00:10:11] language [inaudible 00:10:12]. These are essentially the same words in different languages, or we might even think of them as dialects in certain ways. In India, these are related languages.

So this idea of Sati or [inaudible 00:10:25], it means attention to something. And it has connotations often of memory of bringing something to mind or bringing it back to mind. So you may be performing mindfulness by closely paying attention to something and keeping your awareness on it. That's certainly one of the connotations we see in the modern so-called secularized mindfulness movement. But it doesn't have to be just the present moment or your breath right now, or this piece of food as you're eating it. These are examples that are common in the mindfulness movement. You could be bringing to mind the Buddha or other sorts of religious ideals and focusing your mind on them. So that rather than paying attention to your breath, you're actually using the imagination and being mindful of qualities that you valorize or beings that you respect and this sort of thing.

And in fact, for lay people that would've been much more common. Mantra, for example, is often related to mindfulness in this way. When one is saying a mantra, one is usually evoking the names or qualities of a holy figure, such as the Buddha or a bodhisattva. And so you're being mindful of the qualities of that sacred being that's really quite different from just mindfully focusing on your breath coming in and going out. And yet both of them are absolutely mindfulness practices. In fact, we call that Buddhi [inaudible 00:12:06] mindfulness of the Buddha, and that is far more common as a practice than concentrated mindful awareness of the breath or of the present moment.

**Yasmin:**

Right. In the west, mindfulness has a totally different meaning. It's very detached from at least in society, what we perceive to mindfulness to mean, it's very detached from its religious spiritual aspect, where people repeat these mantras and they're supposed to have this like very spiritual significance. At what point did this phenomena happen of, the secularization of mindfulness?

**Professor Wilson:**

Well, it is a process. It's something that took place stages over multiple generations. But what we can notice that there's an irony that what we think of as the mindfulness movement originates in anticolonial movements in Asia, by Buddhist monks and lay allies attempting to preserve Buddhism in the face of Western imperialism. It starts with anticolonial movements, but by the end of the process, mindfulness itself will be thoroughly colonized by Western capitalism, such that it's essentially become another commodity which is bought and sold in the marketplace. And back to those original origins though, of course, what we had was progressive Western imperialism in Buddhist Asia, which provoked crises within traditionally Buddhist cultures, as you might imagine.

And one of the problems is that this imperialism included not only economic and political domination, but also concerted efforts to get rid of the local cultures and especially the [inaudible 00:14:06] religions and replace them with things such as Christianity. So Buddhism was under direct assault throughout the colonial period. And obviously many Buddhist became concerned about that and wanted to try to protect these important parts of their cultural heritage. So this meant that the anticolonial monks began doing things like popularizing previously monastic elements of Buddhism. The fear was that the monastic Sangha might die out entirely. It was under direct attack from the colonizers. And if the monks and nuns simply perish, if they go out of existence, either through direct violence or through the many forms of structural disadvantage which they suffered compared to Christianity and so on.

Well, if they, the true keepers of sort of the essence of Buddhism, if they disappeared, then Buddhism would disappear. And this would be a great tragedy, obviously for the local people and for the world at large. This was the thought at the time. So they began to popularize certain elements. So certain forms of advanced Buddhist philosophical reasoning, which were primarily only taught within the monastic situations began to be taught widely to people who would not previously had access to it. And also for example meditation

techniques, basic meditation techniques, not the most advanced things, but basic meditation techniques that allowed for a degree of insight were taught in a more popularized fashion with retreats that were accessible to lay people and allowed them to gain some of the benefits of Buddhist meditation in order to advance on the Buddhist path. So that the total level of Buddhist insight and accumulated merit across the society was thereby raised.

And this hopefully would help to preserve Buddhism and also would help to survive as a culture, as a people against imperialism, because as merit is generated by all of society, rather than just the monks and nuns, and some of these cultures only had monks at that point, then that merit would automatically fuel goodness, which is to say it would help to resist Western imperialism in a religious manner here. So that's where it all started. And then as these monks began to teach popularized forms of meditation and philosophy to lay people, eventually we have a situation where Westerners, Western lay people come to Asia, and some of them notice these practices and become interested in them and some of them are invited to participate in them.

So they gain a degree of training. Some of them are even ordained as monks and spend sometime as monks were already there and others spend time in these lay oriented, Buddhist meditation lineages that are developing. Then those people come back to the West and they begin to teach what they have learned. Usually, if they have been monks, they stop being monks or and if they just learn in the lay lineages, they just continue that.

**Yasmin:**

But now I want to talk about Buddhism in the West and what made it so popular, especially particularly in the '60s and '70s and the counter culture movement. And I ask you to speak a little bit on who were the forces behind the mainstreaming of Buddhist practices like mindfulness here in North America.

**Professor Wilson:**

Buddhism speak begins in the category of the most denigrated, most disrespected form of religion and ends up in the category of the most popular, [inaudible 00:18:22], most enticing, most valorized sort of religion. So there's these strange things that happen, these inversions that take place over generations of contact between Asia and North America and Europe. So in this case, Buddhism was initially seen quite negatively by European imperialists and North American ones as well eventually, because what do they coming from a strongly monotheistic Christian background? They find a religion of polytheism or even possibly atheism, since while there are many gods and religious figures. Ultimately the goal is nirvana, which is something which transcends deityship and is not based on worship of any particular deity.

So [inaudible 00:19:14] the strange thing, Buddhism was found to have no belief in an eternal soul, and indeed to undercut the idea of personhood in general. These are seen to be outrageous stupid or radical sort of ideas that flew in the face of common sense and so on and so forth. The initial evaluation of Buddhism could not have been lower due to the cultural preferences and biases that Europeans brought when they investigated it. So it moves from this very

denigrated category into, as you said, by the end of this, like Hollywood is just a chock-a-block full of Buddhist. They're like coming out of the woodwork everywhere and Buddhism [crosstalk 00:20:06].

**Yasmin:**

That's when I heard about like transcendental Buddhism and stuff, like how some celebrities practice it's like, it's all from Hollywood and all that, and I'm like, very skeptical.

**Professor Wilson:**

Yeah. So we have these interesting things. So what happens? Well, first of all, we gain greater knowledge of Buddhism over time. That's one reason that it increases. Secondly, the interpreters change. The initial interpreters, many of them are Christian, especially Catholic missionaries. And let's just say that they're not well situated to want to give a fair hearing to their religious competitors, the Buddhist and so on. So as this shifts to other forms of colonizers, such as civil servants and academics and so on, they over time take a more nuanced and eventually more favorable approach to contextualizing Buddhism for Western audience. Part of it also is that there were changes within the West itself. And particularly, you're trying to point to the sort of 1950s, '60s, '70s counter cultural movement, such as the beads, and then the counterculture with hippies and so on everything.

So the West itself experienced a strong crisis of self-confidence, a decrease in confidence in capitalism, a decrease in confidence in Christianity, a decrease in confidence in what we might call Western civilization. And therefore there were many people individuals at first and then groups, and then eventually generations who began to look for alternatives. And they looked all over the place. They looked not only into Buddhism, but also into Hinduism and into forms of Islam and all sorts of different things. Buddhism, however, ironically, possibly because it had been seen as so different and therefore so bad came to be seen as so different and therefore so good. It lacked monotheism and therefore could be portrayed as being relatively scientifically compatible.

It focused on the mind and people thought that was quite interesting in line with growing movements of psychology, which were becoming [inaudible 00:22:33] more important in American and in other Western places. Right? And so there was a lot in Buddhism that the script basically got flipped and people started to positively evaluate these things. And one of the most important factors was that there were not very many Buddhist around, but there were some. So there were enough Buddhist around to get some exposure to Buddhism, but not enough for Buddhism to be represented by large culturally enfranchised groups of Asian or Asian American, Asian Canadian Buddhist. So you're getting all this sort of Buddhism through books, textbooks, memoirs, and this sort of stuff.

And that allowed non Buddhist people, especially white people to read these things and imagine themselves into the story of Buddhism without the complications of having to deal non-white Buddhist communities around. So you became a Buddhist as an adult on your own, rather than growing up in it as

a child and in a Buddhist community, or even as an adult joining a Buddhist community, which would be something that might be now religiously similar to what you're seeking yet, racially, culturally ethnically, entirely different and lower on the social scale in North America say. So you have had this opportunity to imagine Buddhism and to take it where you will.

At the same time mindfulness was moving in this progression as I described from Asian sources of authority to Western and primarily white sources of authority. So we reached a mass where you could go and learn Buddhism from a white person, or I should say, learn mindfulness from a white person with only just sort of a facade of Buddhism around it to give it some sort of exotic cultural sort of appeal in this way, while remaining in your white middle class Western lifestyle. So it became a tool for augmenting that lifestyle and building some sort of allegedly alternative identity, but without significantly challenging aspects of the west. So it had gone from being anticolonial to being entirely comfortable operating within Western capitalist society.

**Yasmin:**

Buddhism on one side. I mean, that's a very interesting phenomenon now that you say it that way, that people kind of, since there wasn't like enough actual Asian Buddhist to go from, it kind of allowed a lot of like Westerners to just pick and choose the aspects of Buddhism they want to follow and kind of like tailor it to their beliefs. So if they're like very progressive liberal, they kind of make this image of Buddhism. They construct an imagination of Buddhism that is very progressive and liberal role as well. That sort of thing, they kind pick and cherry pick the aspects they like.

So that's one thing, but also I think what you're mentioning about mindfulness, mindfulness no longer is a means of like, as it is with original Buddhism. Like how it started is no longer a way to achieve like nirvana, like this higher spiritual stage of existence or something like that. It doesn't have these connotations. Mindfulness now is like how to use mindfulness to get your dream house, get your dream car, get your dream job, get your dream lifestyle, how to lose weight, losing mindfulness. It becomes part of capitalism. Mindfulness becomes a way to not achieve spiritual excellence, but achieve like material wealth.

**Professor Wilson:**

Certainly something that we see which happens. Now, we should be clear, Buddhism has always been used in order to achieve both otherworldly, as we say in the religious studies discipline, otherworldly and this worldly goals. So part of Buddhism has been about pursuing nirvana, transcending this world, achieving a sort of a detachment or non-attachment to things and to the self. And moving into Buddhahood in this way has always been an important goal of Buddhism. And at the same time, Buddhism has always been used in order to generate merit or good karma and thereby achieve success in this world in order to increase business success, wealth, personal beauty, fertility, all these sort of things. That's always been part of Buddhism as well as it's been part of virtually all religions. This idea of some practical benefits that may accrue to you, that's always been there.

Absolutely. However, that side of Buddhism was never connected to the sort of mindfulness that we're talking about. Mindfulness was on the nirvana focused side of Buddhism and practices to achieve worldly success were very, very different. Strangely though, again, we had this inversion that it takes place over time where something that was a firmly nirvana oriented practice, by the end of the process will be a firmly this worldly benefit oriented practice, a practical benefits oriented practice. So that just, as you say, now, we have many different substreams within the overall gigantic mindfulness movement as it exists in the West, and indeed globally. So very important substreams, include things like mindful sex, using mindful awareness in order to heighten your pleasure, your bonding with your partner and this sort of thing. Mindful eating, which is mainly about increasing your pleasure in eating, but especially about developing disciplined eating habits so that you achieve your dieting goals.

You lose weight, you become slimmer and more physically attractive and this sort of thing, and you reduce bad health effects. Mindful parenting, very, very important as a substream so that you are mindful in the way interact with your children, and therefore you raise them well and they become good people and you don't become too stressed out and this sort of thing. And mindful work a very important one as well, and all the different ways in which could be applied. So mindfulness to help you avoid burning out from work stress, to increase your productivity, to make you a better worker, basically. These are some of the ways in which mindfulness is most commonly applied in North America. All of these things were completely unrelated to original Buddhist monastic application of mindfulness practices. Monks and nuns don't have sex. That's a fundamental aspect of being monks.

So there's no mindful [crosstalk 00:30:12] sex back in the day, therefore there's also no mindful parenting because they're not producing children. They get kicked out of the monastic Sangha, if they sleep around and have children.

**Yasmin:** [crosstalk 00:30:25].

**Professor Wilson:** They're not worried, they do eat mindfully, but they don't eat mindfully in order to look good in a swimsuit. They use food as a way to create mindfulness, not using mindfulness as a way to create the benefit as they want out of food. I'm talking about monks. And mindful work, well, it's not that monks and nuns performed no labor, but they had nothing related to the 9:00 to 5:00 sort of a workers, sort of situations that we have in North America these days. So it has been totally changed in this process. And it is used to try to achieve the benefits that are what white middle class North Americans already wanted.

So they already wanted good sex, good bodies, productive parenting, good families. And they wanted productive work and to earn a lot of money. They already wanted those things prior to Buddhism. When Buddhism comes to them in the form of a somewhat debuddhisize mindfulness practice, they don't use that mind for most practice to achieve Buddhist stands, they use it to achieve



preexisting cultural desires. So there's an irony there, but it's also quite a natural process if we think about it.

**Yasmin:**

All right. So one more question. We're talking so much about how this knowledge, first Asians taught to non-Asians specifically whites and then whites went back to north America and they started teaching other whites about Buddhism and how this knowledge got transferred around. And somewhere along this process, Asian Buddhist, I feel they got left out. Where is these Asian Buddhist position in all these Buddhist developments in North America? Have their voices been marginalized in American or broadly North American Buddhism?

**Professor Wilson:**

Yeah. I think there is a process of marginalization which has taken place. And the end result of that is that when we think today of a mindfulness practitioner, that person, most typically the image of that person and is like a blonde woman in nice, comfortable clothing seated and meditating on their own and achieving sort of peace. Sometimes this person is positioned in actual advertising, like in a field there's somewhere natural, or sometimes they're sitting it on top of a desk or something like this to indicate that you could do it at work. So what do we find there? Well, we find that person is typically white and not Asian, and we find they're typically alone and not in a community. So there is a real irony here because Buddhism has almost always been practiced historically in communities, not by individuals.

And has primarily been practiced and continues to be practiced by people of Asian background, not of white or European background. So the actual models of the representations we have are quite distorted. And because they're distorted, they're also distorted in. They reinforce these ideas that Buddhism is about solo meditation practice in order to achieve a sort of personal wellness and success in life. This is very, very different in the way in which Buddhism is typically practiced by the vast majority of people who are Asians or of Asian descent. And in this case, Buddhism is most often practiced within a community setting. It's practiced not sitting in a dedicated meditation fashion, but rather is integrated in all aspects of life, so that you're living your life generally informed by Buddhist precepts, Buddhist guides of morality. And you're living your life with Buddhist ideas about interrelationship and about rebirth and karma, and these sort of things. Things that are very lightly included or simply excluded in the mindfulness movement.

So there's a distorted image here. And when we look to Buddhism in general, not just mindfulness, but certainly including the mindfulness movement. When we look at representations of Buddhism in North America, by North American Buddhist sort of dominant venues, we find that these are magazines and publishing houses, which are founded by and primarily run by white people, and they cater primarily to middle class white audiences. And something that will not be shocking to people who study these sort of situations, they drastically under represent Asian and Asian American, Asian Canadian Buddhist. So their faces, their voices, their perspectives are not strongly represented in these

magazines, in the books that are published in this sort of thing. Now, these folks actually exist in reality. And in fact, estimates are somewhere between two thirds, or even as much as perhaps 75% of Buddhist practitioners in North America are of Asian background, either recent immigrants or people who are descended from originally Asian immigrants. That's the standard person.

And yet that person is not the one that we see represented in the mindfulness movement. That process of mainstreaming it is also a process of whitening Buddhism, changing the face and the authority of Buddhism. And this has the problem of pushing Asian practitioners many of whom do in fact practice these modernized mass forms of mindfulness meditation that pushes them to the margins, or indeed pushes them off stage entirely and white people come to occupy the center stage or the entirety of the stage. And it's not just about representation, there's direct financial implications of this as well. So there's now an enormous mindfulness industry, which is largely dedicated to things like mindfulness coaches and mindfulness instructors, and this sort of thing. Most of these people are white middle class people who have found a way to monetize Asian Buddhist cultural practices of mindful awareness and so on.

And so the money which is generated off of Buddhist derived practices flows into white people's pockets and into white communities and white social structures rather than into Asian, Asian immigrant, Asian derived Buddhist populations. And so those temples and groups sometimes struggle financially, ironically while they're a wash in a sea of mindfulness products. This is a multi-billion dollar industry, which is enriching many people while immigrant or immigrant derived communities sometimes can't pay the bills. So I do think of my work as contributing to the decolonization of Buddhism in some sense, and hopefully to decommodifying it. If we think of a decolonizing as a complicated process, it always has to begin with knowledge. It has to begin with education. We have to know what took place in the past, what's taking place right now, if we're going to be able to formulate some sense of a game plan for how we go about decolonizing.

So by knowing that past, knowing that present, we can understand the processes that were at work and recognize how they maybe at work right now. That's largely what my book *Mindful America* is about is [crosstalk 00:38:53] missing the processes, the mediations, the mystifications, the medicalization, the mainstreaming, all this sort of stuff, which leads to the marketing of mindfulness as a fully appropriate commodity. So by trying to recognize some of that history, trying to point out these processes, which is to say how capitalism works in order to appropriate Asian cultural and spiritual traditions, and turn them into money making forces for non-Asian peoples. Hopefully with that in mind, then we can begin to envision different ways to go about interacting with mindfulness and with Buddhism. We can hopefully begin to decouple it from market forces and from forces of whiteness, which have led to this sort of wholesale appropriation. And hopefully return to a healthier pattern in interaction with Buddhism, which puts Asian power at the center and also helps to mitigate some of the wholesale transfer of resources which we've seen.

[inaudible 00:40:12] some education, we start to move in different directions from that.

**Yasmin:** Right. Very true, I mean, education is the first step to any sort of progress, that goes without saying. So that's a very good point. Well, thank you, Professor Wilson for joining us and having this very important conversation today and sharing your knowledge with us.

**Professor Wilson:** Well, thank you. It's really been a privilege and an honor to speak with you. I appreciate it.

**Yasmin:** Thank you for joining us today on the third episode of season two of Subaltern Speaks. Head to Spotify, Apple Podcast, or wherever you listen to podcasts to tune into our latest episodes. See you again soon.