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Teaching Buddhism, Mindfulness, and Whiteness

Anna Lännström, *Stonehill College*

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Funie Hsu's "How Mainstream Mindfulness Erases Its Buddhist Roots" hit my classroom like a bombshell. We had studied Hindu and Buddhist teachings in my sophomore-level philosophy class, and we were ending the semester by discussing the mindfulness movement. I had introduced Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and we had watched a video where Jon Kabat-Zinn demonstrated the program in action. The students were deeply moved by how he helped people with severe chronic pain in the video, and they loved his caring and gentle teaching persona.

Funie Hsu was less impressed, pointing out that white people like Jon Kabat-Zinn appropriate Buddhism without acknowledging Asian American Buddhists and their contributions. They talk about going to Asia as part of the counter-culture movement, learning meditation and mindfulness from Buddhist teachers in Asia, and then bringing it all back to the United States. But Buddhism didn't come to America in the 1960s. It was brought to the United States by Chinese and Japanese immigrants in the 1800s.

My students already looked nervous, and it got worse. Hsu explained that those immigrants and their religion were met with suspicion, racism, and discrimination. But many of their leaders still opened their temples to curious white visitors, and some became mentors to them. Their work has remained largely invisible in the white community, even though many of the

famous white teachers were taught by Asian-American Buddhists. And that seems kind of ... racist. Hsu writes,

Though Kabat-Zinn has practiced with Buddhist teachers himself ... his strategic erasure of Buddhism reinforces racial and religious stereotypes in order to appease a white-dominant social structure.

("How Mainstream Mindfulness Erases Its Buddhist Roots," The Progressive, February 12, 2022)

All this seemed ... very bad indeed.

My classroom was almost all white (except for a Muslim student from Pakistan), and that was suddenly painfully visible to all of us. The students were in shock. They were also guilt-ridden and defensive. Several argued that Jon Kabat-Zinn was a bad man, and other students nodded. They concluded that Buddhism should be left to Asians and Asian Americans, white people shouldn't explore Buddhism, and they certainly shouldn't adopt and modify any of its practices in the ways that Kabat-Zinn had. Two guys in the back of my classroom timidly suggested that Kabat-Zinn should get credit for helping people with severe chronic pain cope without opioids, but they were quickly shamed into silence.

I wasn't *quite* shamed into silence myself, but I might as well have been since my talking had no effect. It wasn't my finest hour. I paid for it by reading *a lot* of preachy and one-sided final papers.

So how *should* non-Asian Americans handle Buddhism and mindfulness in our classrooms and our lives? Were my students right that we should just stay away?

No, I don't think so. I may have been more successful in getting students to reconsider if I had asked them to reread Hsu. She writes,

Buddhism belongs to all sentient beings. Even so, Asians and Asian Americans have a rightful, distinct historical claim to Buddhism.... It is because of our physical, emotional, and spiritual labor, our diligent cultivation of the practice through time and through histories of oppression, that Buddhism has persisted to the current time period and can be shared with non-Asian practitioners.

In order to alleviate the suffering caused by cultural appropriation, we can refrain from asserting ownership of a free teaching that belongs all. We can refrain from asserting false authority and superiority over those who have diligently maintained the practice to share freely with others. And we can actively work to give dana [generosity] by expressing gratitude for the Asian and Asian American Buddhists

who have shared their indigenous ways of being as integral expressions of their practice. (“We’ve Been Here All Along,” *Lion’s Roar*)

Buddhism does belong to all sentient beings. But with that ownership comes responsibility. We need to learn the history. We need to seek out and listen carefully to Asian American voices whenever we can. We need to learn from those whose connections to the tradition are deeper than our own, and we need to acknowledge our debts to them.

So how might I teach a class that would do all that better?

Here’s what I’m trying this semester.

- We start with mindfulness and MBSR, reading Thich Nhat Hanh and Jon Kabat-Zinn.
- We then critically examine the mindfulness movement. We read Funie Hsu, learning how Buddhism was brought to the United States by Asians and how it has been received. We read narratives of young Asian American Buddhists (courtesy of Chenxing Han’s work) and notice the wide variety of practices and views. We read Donald Lopez, learning that the mindfulness movement adapts Buddhism in a selective and limited way. We think through the thorny issues of cultural appropriation, and we discuss ways in which we may be able to engage Buddhist people, ideas, and practices in a more respectful way.
- Only after all that, several weeks into the semester, do we turn to Buddhist teachings.

I like how the class is going so far (we’re starting Buddhist teachings), and I just won a big victory. A student from the first class I discussed is also in this one. She was loudly unflinching in her condemnation of Jon Kabat-Zinn last time. I was not happy about having her in this class: I worried that she would make it impossible for the other students to think through the issues. But she is two years older now, and she’s better at nuance. In her midterm paper, she is planning on critiquing her final paper on Jon Kabat-Zinn from two years ago. When I spoke with her yesterday, she was still objecting to Kabat-Zinn’s work, but she had just reread her old paper and found it embarrassing – “it is so all or nothing, so very simplistic.”

I look forward to reading what she comes up with. Clearly, I’m not the only one who has learned something since last time.

Notes & Bibliography

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<https://wabash.center/2025/04/teaching-buddhism-mindfulness-and-whiteness/>