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Buddhist Modernism, Meditation, and Mindfulness:  
What is at Stake?

on March 6, 2018 at Emmanuel College,  
Victoria University, University of Toronto

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A Reflection on Dr. Robert Sharf's Lecture  
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On March 6, 2018, Professor Dr. Cuilan Liu welcomed Dr. Robert Sharf, D. H. Chen Distinguished Professor of Buddhist Studies, Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures, University of California, Berkeley, to present his lecture, "Buddhist Modernism, Meditation, and Mindfulness: What is at Stake?" to students and faculty members at Emmanuel College, Victoria University, University of Toronto.

Dr. Sharf's work is primarily on medieval Chinese Buddhism (Chan, in particular) and he is also interested in Japanese Buddhism, Buddhist art, Buddhist philosophy, ritual studies, and methodological

issues in the study of religion.<sup>1</sup> It was a great pleasure to host Dr. Sharf as part of a series of talks highlighting the Master of Pastoral Studies Program—Buddhist Studies and the Diploma Program in Buddhist Mindfulness and Mental Health.

## Introduction

Dr. Sharf shared a fascinating narrative of how Zen Buddhism was introduced to the West and the origins of *Buddhist modernism*. This tale has captivated him over the past thirty years. For readers interested in further background, Dr. Sharf has written papers that deal much more substantially with the history of Buddhist modernism including “Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience,”<sup>2</sup> “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism,”<sup>3</sup> “Is Mindfulness Buddhist? (and why it matters),”<sup>4</sup> and “Mindfulness and Mindlessness in Early Chan.”<sup>5</sup> He also discussed at length the potential implications of Buddhist modernism for the development of the religion in the West, especially for meditation

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<sup>1</sup> East Asian Languages and Cultures, Faculty Member, Buddhist Studies, University of California, Berkeley, “Robert Sharf,” accessed August 21, 2018, <http://berkeley.academia.edu/RobertSharf>

<sup>2</sup> Robert Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience,” *Nu-men* 42, no. 3 (1995): 228-283, republished in *Buddhism: Critical Concepts in Buddhist Studies*, ed. Paul Williams (London: Routledge, 2005), vol. 2, 255-298.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Sharf, “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism,” in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 107-160.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Sharf, “Is Mindfulness Buddhist? (and why it matters),” *Transcultural Psychiatry* 52, no. 4 (2014): 470-484.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Sharf, “Mindfulness and Mindlessness in Early Chan,” *Philosophy East and West* 64, no. 4 (2014): 933-964.

and contemporary mindfulness movement. It is also the topic of his 2007 interview with the tricycle magazine titled "Losing our Religion."<sup>6</sup>

### **Where did Buddhist modernism come from?**

Dr. Sharf began by telling a story of how the concept of Buddhist modernism evolved from an interconnected series of catalytic events and scholarly collaboration between Asia and the West over the past 120 years.

Originally termed "Protestant Buddhism," Buddhist modernism describes a transition from understanding Buddhism as a ritual-based, institution-led, and doctrine-focused religious experience to a personal religious one. This transition reflected an attempt to reconcile Buddhism with late nineteenth-century scientific thought.<sup>7</sup>

He began with the story of the emergence of New Buddhism (*Shin Bukkyō* 新佛教) in Japan in the late nineteenth century. Noticed for its focus on meditation over doctrinal studies, New Buddhism was an outcome of the monastic attempt to revive the religion in the face of dwindling public interest, a loss of guaranteed income for Buddhist temples, and persecution of Buddhism in the 1870s; the reform movement that positioned Buddhism as a world faith with powerful spiritual teachings, letting go of a perception of it as being an old, morbid, funerary cult. A notable public figure at this time was D. T. Suzuki (1870- 1966), an eminent Buddhist modernist who had major influence on the interpretation of Zen Buddhism in the West.

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<sup>6</sup> The Editors, "Losing Our Religion," *Tricycle: History and Philosophy*, Summer 2007.

<sup>7</sup> The Editors, "Losing Our Religion."

D. T. Suzuki was heavily influenced by works of Paul Carus (1852-1919) and William James (1842-1910), which advocated for a modern view of Buddhism as a religion of science, free of superstitions, through which one can gain enlightenment purely by means of personal religious experience. Paul Carus's *The Gospel of Buddha*, whose Japanese translation by Suzuki became a leading Buddhist textbook in Japan, is a synthesis of his philosophy of Buddhism as a religion of science and the Buddha as its first prophet.<sup>8</sup> William James's 1902 book *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, which Dr. Sharf argued to be influenced by James's experimentation with Peyote (Mescaline) and LSD, argues that religious experience is essentially personal experience. This notion of religious experience as personal one was later adopted by Suzuki in his concept of *satori* 悟 or *kenshō* 見性.<sup>9</sup>

The emergence of Buddhist modernism also led to a new understanding of meditation as a doctrinal-independent personal practice, as evidenced by work of Nyanaponika Thera (1901-1994) who popularized the Mahasi technique and was believed to be the first to translate *sati*, originally meaning "memory," to *bare awareness*. Dr. Sharf hinted that Nyanaponika's focus on paying attention to the present moment did not explicitly include "this notion of *sati* . . . [that] has meant to recollect the doctrines or teachings of the Buddha in each moment of practice."

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<sup>8</sup> The Editors, "Losing Our Religion."

<sup>9</sup> Ngoc Le, "Modernized Buddhism & Secular Religion: A Write-Up of Dr. Victor Sogen Hori's Presentation at UBC 2016 Conference," *CJBS News Blog*, September 28, 2016, <https://cjbuddhist.wordpress.com/2016/09/28/modernized-buddhism-secular-religion-a-write-up-of-dr-victor-sogen-horis-presentation-at-ubc-2016-conference/>

### The Mahasi Technique and Defining Mindfulness

Dr. Sharf then described the Burmese meditation revival and the work of Ledi Sayadaw (1846-1923) and Mahasi Sayadaw (1904-1982) in popularizing Buddhism among the lay population in Burma from the late 1800s to early 1900s. He argues that what we think of as mindfulness practice today is based on an interpretation of the Pali term *sati* (Sanskrit *smṛti*) as *bare awareness* developed by these two Burmese figures, especially by Mahasi Sayadaw's insight practice. In Theravada Buddhism, *sati*, meaning to recollect or to remember, historically described the way a practitioner was supposed to understand what was happening when doing Buddhist practice through the lens of the Buddhist doctrines. Since lay people are not familiar with Buddhist doctrines, Mahasi Sayadaw developed a meditation technique that does not require practitioners to recall monastic texts but instead to focus on their experience. His new method transformed the meaning of the term *sati*, normally understood as *sa-matha* (practices of focusing on the mind), to *vipassana* (practices of insight, analytic deliberation, understanding, or wisdom). One could now reach enlightenment simply by observing what was happening in the experience. There was no longer a need to memorize long lists of *dharma*s, or even to know Buddhist doctrine. This *Mahasi technique* became the foundation of mindfulness in North America. The transformation of the meaning of *sati* to *bare awareness* and its resultant Mahasi technique were evidently influenced by Buddhist modernism.

### Gain and Loss

When deliberating on “what is at stake” in the translation of “Buddhism to meditation, and meditation to mindfulness,” Dr. Sharf asserted that it results in the notion that to be a Buddhist is to be spiritual but not religious. In his opinion, this view is odd, historically, as the majority of Buddhists were lay people, and that these practitioners did not have access to meditation. In fact, meditation was not at the heart of Buddhism, or the sole vocation of monks, but rather one aspect of Buddhism.

Dr. Sharf reminded us that we are dealing with the translation of the religion across different cultures and contexts—some elements were gained and others were lost. He conceded that while Buddhist modernism has been beneficial in helping us, in the West, to deal with the ailments of our age, many of the fundamental teachings of Buddhism have been lost in its geographical and temporal transformation. The *three jewels*—*Buddha*, *Dharma*, and *Sangha*, are essential components that have been lost.

*Buddha* represents the faith element. His concern is about the hubris of practitioners in assuming that they know everything and leaving out any *cultural accretions*, thus losing the important sense that the tradition is greater than we are, and what it means to take refuge in the *Buddha*.

Another crucial element Dr. Sharf finds missing is the *Dharma*, or the teachings of the Buddha. *Dharma* represents the intellectual resources of the Buddhist tradition—a two thousand year-old debate about how to understand Buddhism. Those arguments are valuable intellectual resources in addressing existentialist issues. He is concerned that the

complex historical and cultural knowledge of Buddhism is jettisoned in our focus on personal experience.

Finally, Dr. Sharf worries that the *Sangha*, originally an intentional community of Buddhist monks, is absent. Since self-discipline is difficult for human beings, we need community for support. Monastic communities, traditionally, have dealt with the problem of the self (or no-self) in this way.

Perhaps it is helpful to share a passage from Dr. Sharf's interview (2007) in *tricycle*<sup>10</sup> which summarizes what he was alluding to in the talk:

Sharf's critique of Buddhist modernism stems from a belief that we cannot reduce Buddhism to a simple set of propositions and practices without in some way distorting our sense of its wholeness and complexity. For Sharf, understanding a religious tradition demands not only familiarity with contemporary practice but also a willingness to enter into dialogue with what is historically past and culturally foreign. To participate in such a dialogue we need knowledge of the context in which the tradition is embedded and an ability to see past the presuppositions of our own time and place. Clearing the ground, as it were, for this dialogue with tradition is the job of critical scholarly practice in religious life.

Dr. Sharf concluded his talk with a case study of the "Shamatha Project,"<sup>11</sup> in which longitudinal studies are conducted to understand the psychological and therapeutic impacts of mindfulness. Dr. Sharf is critical of such studies as they disregard the context in which mindfulness is

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<sup>10</sup> The Editors, "Losing Our Religion."

<sup>11</sup> Clifford Saron, "The Shamatha Project," *The Saron Lab*, <http://saronlab.ucdavis.edu/shamatha-project.html>, accessed 2018-04-29.



practiced. By attributing the success of mindfulness programs or multi-day retreats to the creation of temporary intentional community for individuals, he challenges researchers to consider and study the effects of *Sangha* as a determining success factor, stating that human beings need to feel a sense of belonging in order to alleviate their suffering and existential anguish.

### Inquiry and Clarity

Dr. Sharf's lecture was followed by questions from attendees. I was most interested in this part of the event since I am a mindfulness meditation (MBSR, MBCT, MSC)<sup>12</sup> teacher, practitioner of *insight meditation* or *vipassana*, and a student in the Master of Pastoral Studies – Buddhist Studies program.

Dr. Sharf advised us to remember not to get caught up in the notion of purity of the teachings and that if you are a Buddhist, change is inevitable.

He urged us to keep in mind that each particular strain of Buddhism has its own local history, punctuated by attempts of reform movements to go back to the original teachings. We cannot judge all forms of mindfulness, as they appear today, as wrong. We need to place them in the context of our time. Dr. Sharf emphasized the notion that there is no stable core of Buddhist teachings, and we must engage in a

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<sup>12</sup> MBSR – Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction; MBCT – Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy; MSC – Mindful Self-Compassion. MBSR is an 8-week mindfulness based program developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, which is based on a complex interaction between Zen, yogic traditions of India, and of Burmese vipassana. It is also scientifically researched and evidence based.

conversation that has been ongoing for two thousand years about these teachings.

He pointed out that the living tradition of Pali scholarship continues in Theravada Buddhism today with the work, notably, of Buddhist converts and top monastic specialists such as Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Bhikkhu Bodhi, and Bhikkhu Analayo. To Dr. Sharf, Theravada Buddhism is a way of life with mindfulness as one of its aspects.

Dr. Sharf steered away from discussing the widespread scientific applications of mindfulness over the past three decades. However, when asked to give advice to secular mindfulness teachers on how to improve their knowledge of the origins of mindfulness and Buddhist teachings, Dr. Sharf stressed that it is important for Buddhist teachers to read the scriptures, just as in Islam and Judaism. He advised: "My solution is that it would be nice if Buddhist teachers tried to educate themselves [about Buddhism]." He mentioned modern Buddhist teachers such as Thich Nhat Hanh and Dr. Jack Kornfield who have been influenced by teachings from many lineages to bring mindfulness meditation and Buddhism to the lay population in the West. In *Mindfulness*, Dr. J. Mark G. Williams and Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn also agree that education on Buddhism for teachers is needed and add that we must also take into account the relative youth of the mindfulness movement in its evolution, keeping in mind the need to stop and evaluate before acting.<sup>13</sup> I believe an open-to-learning approach will serve to bridge the gap that Dr. Sharf is concerned about.

I would like to extend heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Sharf for visiting and acquainting us with his views on Buddhist modernism. His captivating story-telling approach and unique way of bringing the history and characters to life certainly left its mark at Emmanuel College. For readers

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<sup>13</sup> Mark Williams and Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Mindfulness – Diverse Perspectives on its Meaning, Origins and Applications* (UK and USA: Routledge, 2013), xiii-1.

who are interested in exploring his work further, please visit [Dr. Sharf's home page](#). I look forward to providing additional reflections during the 2018-2019 academic year. I am thankful for this opportunity, as made possible by Dr. Cuilan Liu.

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