

# Buddha's Delight, Part 1

📅 Mon, 3/21 9:00PM ⌚ 49:51

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

buddhism, buddha, buddhists, religion, practice, world religions, people, chinese buddhism, tradition, laughs, tibetan buddhism, chen, buddhist practices, nerds, texts, episode, ritual, hear, notions, china

## SPEAKERS

If You Don't Know, Now You Know, Megan Goodwin, Dr. Dixuan Yujing Chen, Bonus Ending, Simpsons, A Little Bit Leave It, Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst

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Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 00:17

This is Keeping It 101, a killjoy's introduction to religion podcast. In 2021-2022, our work is made possible through a Public Humanities Fellowship from the University of Vermont's Humanities Center. We're grateful to live, teach, and record on the current, ancestral, and unceded lands of the Abenaki, Wabenaki, and Aucocisco peoples. As always, you can find material ways to support indigenous communities on our website.



Megan Goodwin 00:41

What is up nerds?! Hi, hello, I'm Megan Goodwin, a scholar of American religions, race, and gender.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 00:46

Hi, hello! I'm Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst, a historian of religion, Islam, race and racialization, and South Asia. Well, here we are, Goodwin. Another day, another episode.



Megan Goodwin 00:57

That is how this all goes, generally, when we hit the record, and we pull up our scripts and bibliographies, et cetera.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 01:04

Like... don't break the third wall so readily, man. We're just in the cold open!



Megan Goodwin 01:09

\*giggles\* Can I tell you, I had to do math on that. Like, I guess it is a third wall because it's NOT theater. Anyway, I'm sorry.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 01:14

Yeah, that's the joke. \*laughs\*



Megan Goodwin 01:15

I know! It's good. I laughed. I just... also had to do a math about it for a minute.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 01:19

Well, quick question.



Megan Goodwin 01:20

Yeah. Okay, what do ya got?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 01:21

So we've been doing the HISTORY OF THE WORLD (RELIGIONS) PART 1 for so long now that I can't... I can't really remember what we've done and what's coming next.



Megan Goodwin 01:29

Yeah, well, A) first, lies, obviously. And second, if you're suggesting a quick catch up, I got you, boo! We critiqued the world religions paradigm while also teaching folks a wee little bit about African Diasporic Religions. We did two episodes on Indigenous religions (one on Shinto and another on North American/Turtle Island Indigenous traditions), did a sick one on Sikhi-- love that we're committed to that terrible pun, I feel like Simran would be proud of us-- two offerings on Hindu traditions, two on Islam, one on Christianity, another on Judaism, and one applications episode on religion and law! Which, according to my calculations-- and we know how good I am at math-- makes today's episode the start of a two-episode arc into Buddhisms!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 02:19

Ohhh! That makes ordering "Buddha's Delight #1" off the History of World Religions menu makes SO much more sense. Clever, that. But! Now I need different lunch plans. Oy vey!



Megan Goodwin 02:31

\*laughs\* Noo, not the tasting menu.



Dr. Dixuan Yujing Chen 02:34

I'm hysterical! I'm in hysterics. I'm wet, and I'm hysterical, and it's-- the lesson plan!



Megan Goodwin 02:39

\*laughs\* Today, nerds, it's Buddhism's turn to get the Keeping It 101 world religions treatment. We're stressing plurality, we're talking divergences, we're thinking about how and why Buddhism has a place in the world religions model. We'll probably talk about that -ism, since you know that's a surefire sign it's a made-up (white Christian European) phrase for complex, composite practices.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 03:14

I love to rag on an -ism!



Megan Goodwin 03:16

Same girl, same. So today's thesis is par for the course: Buddhism is an interesting case study to think about the world religions model. Buddhists are diverse and interesting, and Buddhist practices range from non-theistic to atheistic to, frankly, polytheistic. It's rad and wild and wonderful.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 03:32

And we are SO lucky to have yet ANOTHER rad expert join us today. Dr. Dixuan Yujing Chen, Assistant Professor of East Asian Religions at Grinnell College, whose research interests are really broad but include things like: Buddhist doctrines, Buddhist art, the history of Buddhism in China, the development of Buddhism in the West, and the mutual interactions between Buddhism and other religions. Dr. Chen is ALSO an ordained Buddhist nun of the Mahayana tradition (and we'll define that later, I promise). I had the pleasure of visiting her class last year via zoom at Grinnell, and I'm so glad that she agreed to join us on this podcast today. So let's let's just jump in. Let's get moving with-- the 101 on today-- \*clicks tongue\* --the section where we do professor work. There's SOOO much to talk about in Buddhism, Megan. There's why the word is an -ism, there's how notions of divinity work (or don't), there's temple practices, Buddha himself, images of the Buddha. Then there's foodways, monks and nuns, the wide, wide range of practices across Buddhist traditions, which are always based on historical, regional, linguistic contexts... oh! There's also gender issues, notions of secularity, the ways colonizers thought Buddhism to be more of a "philosophy" than a "religion" and--



Megan Goodwin 04:46

Yeah, okay, okay, okay, okay. We get it. This is a gigantic umbrella term for a religion that includes something like 535 million people worldwide, if we can even quantify it, because, as we'll talk about over these two episodes, Buddhist practices are participated in by lots of folks, some of whom might not even identify as Buddhist! BUT, since scoreboards are a thing that people understand and you, Ilyse, are the people, let's look at some numbers. We know that most of the world's Buddhists live in China, but within China, Buddhists are a demographic minority. We know that many other Asian nations have Buddhist majorities, like Thailand, or significant Buddhist minorities, like Japan. Most Buddhists who practice in the US are of Asian origin. Buddhism is concentrated in Asia, and even more specifically East and Southeast Asia, but it is also a global religion-- on every continent across ethnicities, nationalities, races, and of course, genders and sexualities. Is that enough scoreboard for you? I know you're usually our maths person. That'll do, Megan. You've done enough math today. Thank you. Math is hard!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 05:52

Yeah, it is. It's super hard. So, for some order amidst the chaos that is the world religions model, let's talk about some basics of Buddhism writ large (with obvious interjections of plurality) this time, and then next time, let's go with some like... let's go nuts with regional variation and examples.



Megan Goodwin 06:12

Love that for us.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 06:13

So, with those numbers squared away, can we talk about what \*I\* care about? I have specific questions that get at all the things we're supposed to be getting at today, I think.



Megan Goodwin 06:26

What about you? What about Tyra? No. I couldn't stop you if I tried, and I would never want to try. So please, let's go!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 06:33

Alright. So, three questions. They're not easy ones, mind, but there's only three, which I guess is a benefit.



Megan Goodwin 06:39

Sure

Sure.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 06:40

Okay, number one: I've seen the Buddha in my local garden store as a tiny planter or as a landscaping/hardscaping statue. But who was this man who is maybe a god but also a lawn ornament?



Megan Goodwin 06:56

\*snickers\*



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 06:56

Okay, that's just question one. Keep it together.



Megan Goodwin 06:58

I try! \*snickers\* I'm sorry.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 07:01

Question two: Buddhism is a big, BIG term, and Buddhists themselves have different traditions within that. What are some of these traditions?!



Megan Goodwin 07:11

Oooohhh.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 07:12

And, third-- I guess, finally, third: tell me about divinity in Buddhism. Because my favorite 19th-century colonizers were obsessed with Buddhist philosophy, but they were also adamant that Buddhism was either nontheistic or, like, an enlightened form of monotheism, depending on the Orientalist. So, what gives?



Megan Goodwin 07:34

Okay, uhhhh.... wow. Okay. So, I think you're really going for it or coming for me, and I can't tell. I suspect it's both, uhhh...



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 07:42

Sorry. This is an educational podcast and I have QUESTIONS.



Megan Goodwin 07:46

FINE! Fine. Okay: A) of all, you horrible bitch, asking how Buddha is divine, or maybe not, but also definitely a planter/I see him regularly on the shelves of my TJ Maxx, which is just choosing violence at the top of an episode and really, like, at any time,



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 08:02

In fairness, it was not I who chose to make Buddhist imagery lawn ornamentation. I am merely calling out the sketchiness of it all.



Megan Goodwin 08:11

Yeah, that's fair enough. That's really on Kmart. Okay. Yeah. So let's talk about who the Buddha was then! Buddha was a person, and most scholars of Buddhism agree that he was a person named Siddhārtha Gautama, a high-casted and well-off man in the 5th-6th century BCE, South Asia. Siddhārtha comes to be known as Buddha, capital "B," a few centuries later-- \*Secret Word of the Day!\* Buddha is a title, of sorts, meaning "Enlightened" or "Awakened" one. That is-- that he is THE Buddha, capital "B," and not just any old lowercase "B" Buddha tells us how revered he was and is.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 08:47

Okay. So I hear you telling me that the Buddha was a historical person, that Buddha is more of an honorific title than a name like Jennifer--



Megan Goodwin 08:58

\*laughs\* Not Jennifer! Nooooo.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 09:00

And I'm going to infer that Siddhārtha Gautama's early followers develop what will become the tenets, practices, and cultures we see in many Buddhist communities now.



Megan Goodwin 09:11

That was some excellent active listening, IRMF. Whole books and subfields focused on the Buddha himself, and we do not have time for that, since you threw me three questions that

could take years to answer. Thanks! Thanks for that. But, okay. So, let me talk about the physical, human Buddha for a second. A lot of our nerds will have indeed seen Buddha in his various physical forums-- we hope at places like temples, and Buddhists homes or businesses, maybe in museums or even famously large, public, Buddhas, like, when traveling was a thing. Remember that? \*sighs\* Even though we know too many nerds will know Buddha from kitschy tchotchkes like planters, or desk ornaments, or as part of allegedly secular mindfulness apps.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 09:24

\*laughs\* No prob. I said when I said. If you could buy the Buddha at Lowe's, we might have a problem.



Megan Goodwin 09:59

Yeah, we have a problem. Alright. So, that Lowe's Buddha, for example, is often the round-bellied, smiling, laughing Buddha with his hands positioned up or down. Or, like, I've seen the peaceful Buddha-- cross-legged, hands in "OM" position, or prayer hands-- marketed everywhere. But there's also the starving Buddha, who is depicted as emaciated, and it's meant to highlight his asceticism. Less popular as a marketing gimmick, so less familiar to non-Buddhist Americans, for sure. But, regardless of where you may see these Buddha's sold, each is actually deeply important and it has a multi-millennia history. All of which is to say, IRMF, that I think you're big mad about Buddha heads and smiling Buddhas and happy Buddhas and prayer hand Buddhas being used as new age garden elements because it is some basic, basic capitalist appropriation.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 10:46

Yeah, I mean, it's a funny quip, right? I bought someone's God at Target. It's funny because it's bananas, and I'm not... I'm not actually entirely mad that it's possible, right? So, I've lived in places where buying icons of deities on the street, for cheap, is actually an important part of community participation in religion. Hell, that's not even a foreign country thing. In my rather Catholic neighborhood growing up Virgin Mary lawn ornaments were standard! I just--



Megan Goodwin 11:12

\*laughs\* It's the Virgin Mary in the bathtub, right?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 11:15

Yeah!



Megan Goodwin 11:16

There's a half a bathtub in your front lawn with Mary in it. Anyway.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 11:20

Totally. I just want, as always, our nerds to hear, and understand, and question why Buddha is readily available in ways that, frankly, DO seem off-- why is the Buddha's head hollowed out for your hipster succulent? What needed to happen over time that this divine /semi-divine/definitely revered founder of a whole ass religion could also be, like, a decapitated planter?



Megan Goodwin 11:36

Oh, no. \*laughs\* You're so mad about the plantar part of it.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 11:51

I am! I am. It's dirt, it's dirty, and most Asian cultures-- frankly, most cultures broadly, but certainly most Asian cultures-- have notions of purity and how we treat icons, images, you name it. So like, DIRT is usually NOT it.



Megan Goodwin 12:06

Yeah.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 12:06

Alright, alright. Let me get off-- let me get off the Target of it all. \*sighs\* That's who Buddha was. My second question was something like tell me about Buddhist traditions. You know, easy peasy.



Megan Goodwin 12:18

Sure. Yeah. No. Point of order, that is too big. Here is what I will give you instead. I will tell you about different ways of being Buddhist, and we can mention a few ways that we would see that in the world!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 12:29

That's a fair compromise. I am on board.



Megan Goodwin 12:32

Cool. Buddhism is enormous.





Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 12:33

Checks out.



Megan Goodwin 12:34

Yep. And Buddhism, as we said, is an umbrella term as evidenced by the -ism.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 12:39

Indeed.



Megan Goodwin 12:40

And usually, you get the world religions paradigm rant, but I'm gonna take this one, because it is my turn, dammit!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 12:46

The floor, she's yours.




Megan Goodwin 12:48

Thank you! So, we know that Buddhism is an English word because, again, of that -ism. And we know that the vast array of practices of Buddhism vary so widely that in some places, Buddhism is really non-theistic altogether, in practice and in philosophy, and in other places, Buddhism might mean non-theistic in spirit, but in practice, folks pray to Buddha, seek his intervention, hope for blessings from him-- in short, it works kinda like monotheism. And, in other places still, Buddha is but one divine or divine-adjacent figure one might seek help from, meaning that Buddhism exists in, like, polytheistic-ish kind of spaces as well. So, none of that makes it to the world religions paradigm. I know. Which is-- which is basic trash, as we have said from the beginning. All that makes it, really, is the bit that fits: Buddha founds of religion that is specifically talking back against an older, more legalistic, "have to be born into it" religion. His, shall we say, protest is about reforming a more just community, bringing enlightenment to all who choose to seek it, and with universalist philosophies that apply to everyone.





Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 13:31


Shock. Gasp! Hmm.


 Megan Goodwin 13:44  
Hmm. Sound familiar?


 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 13:53  
It SEEMS like many of those old, crusty Orientalists were obsessed with Buddhism as a philosophy--


 Megan Goodwin 14:09  
Mm.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 14:09  
--or as a way of being that seemed rather like Christianity, and more specifically, maybe like, Protestant Reformation Universal Christianity.

 Megan Goodwin 14:20  
Gasp.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 14:21  
Yeah! Because you've got this male rebel leader who just starts telling truths and building followers, whose religion takes off not where it was planted, but rather beyond those ethnically defined places, who is not a father or a family man, but very much His Own Dude. So, say, unlike Judaism or Hinduism, Buddhism is imagined in this mode as universal-- it could be anyone's religion. You can choose to join it, and it isn't ethnic. Which is not to say, Megan, that Buddhists come out well in the world religions paradigm. So, there's a split-- obviously, you know my jam is orientalist-- but there's a split amongst them because Buddhism is, for them, like a mindfuck. Because it's universal, but it's also too ritualistic. It's philosophic, but it's too bounded by these local traditions. There's a lot to say here, but there's a thread of thinking that says, frankly, Buddhism would be better without those pesky Buddhists-- which is a racialized argument period, the end, forever.


 Megan Goodwin 15:23  
Oh, nooooo. Okay.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 15:32  
But Megan, as much as I love an intellectual history, none of it actually tells me about Buddhist


practice. What does the failure of the world religions paradigm actually mean for practice, or what Buddhists are doing?

 Megan Goodwin 15:47


I am so glad that you asked me that, Ilyse! The short answer is: when Buddhism is made into a philosophy divorced from lived experiences in the world religion paradigm-- or more specifically, when the rituals of Buddhism come to be seen as "bugs" in an otherwise reasonable philosophical system (please hear all of the racism undergirding that)-- the thing that is purposefully left out or demeaned is... what people do? Hmm.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 16:16


I mean, not surprising, but still, like, F minus.

 Megan Goodwin 16:19


Yep, yep, yep.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 16:19


Please take the class again.

 Megan Goodwin 16:20

Correct. A different way to say that might be: Buddhism has always been deeply diverse internally, and not just because of location or language-- though, duh, those also matter-- even if the world religions paradigm eschews that diversity.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 16:34

Yeah, location, language, context absolutely matter. That's us on our bullshit. But before we get into regional specifics, or maybe even linguistic ones, can we do some textbook words about Buddhism moment?


 Megan Goodwin 16:45


Yeah. Hit me.


 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 16:46


Okay. So, there are different forms of Buddhism, but most known perhaps are Theravada and


Mahayana. \*Secret Word of the Day!\*

 Megan Goodwin 16:57  
Okay.


 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 16:58  
If we are following our norm and avoiding Christocentric terms, we can think of these less as "sects" or "denominations" than, perhaps, approaches, worldviews, or orders. Theravada Buddhism is older. Most folks translate that as, like, "way of the elders," but that sounds like a bad Lord of the Rings movies. I've heard folks talk about--

 Megan Goodwin 17:21  
So hateful. You're so hateful, but keep going.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 17:23  
Ha! I've heard folks talk about Theravada as more conservative, but I admit-- I'm not really sure what that means all the time, and I don't want our listeners to hear conservative and think of things like American voting patterns. That's not what we mean here. Modern people are Theravada Buddhists and being Theravada has as much to do with where you live, what kinds of Buddhism are popular there, and your locations politics as anything else. One of the reasons it's understood, as far as I understand it, as more conservative has to do with texts-- which texts are considered canon, which texts that other Buddhists-- that other Buddhists might use aren't accepted at all.

 Megan Goodwin 18:03  
So, that's about texts, and it's about what people do, because it's about consensus around which texts get to inform practice, behavior, rituals, etc.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 18:10  
Exactly!

 Megan Goodwin 18:11  
Okay. And from what I understand, Mahayana adds onto the canon and texts of Therevada, but also adds new stuff, tellingly like the aptly named MahÄyÄna SÄ«tras. That makes sense. In my classes, we usually emphasize that Mahayana Buddhism made more space for lay (or non-

specialist) participation in the sangha (Buddhist community, and we're going to talk more about understandings of sangha on our next episode, nerds). Mahayana Buddhism is a range of Buddhist practices, so maybe you've heard of Han, or Pure Land, or Zen, or Tibetan Buddhism. These are often categorized under the Mahayana umbrella.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 18:47

Okay, wait. Back up. Buddhism is an umbrella term.



Megan Goodwin 18:52

Yes.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 18:53

And then under that, there are two major ways of organizing Buddhist philosophy and worldviews, and under THAT, there's even more names and categories??



Megan Goodwin 19:01

I do not say religion is messy THRICE in one episode for my health, lady.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 19:06

Alright, fair enough. So, if I could sum up all these names, it seems like Buddhism is internally diverse, and region, language, history, culture all impact how and what kind of Buddhism is practiced.



Megan Goodwin 19:16

Totes magotes. What was the last question you asked?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 19:27

Okay, of my three questions--



Megan Goodwin 19:29

Uh huh.





Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 19:30

I asked--



Megan Goodwin 19:31

There were questions three. Was it... \*inaudible\*



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 19:36

\*laughs\* No. I asked, why are Buddhists heads planters? I asked, what the Buddhists do? And finally, I asked about divinity in Buddhism, because I'm obnoxious, but also because I know that the world religions paradigm really cares about divinity-- it's one of those ways that, frankly, white Christian European imperialist-scholar-Orientalists set about classifying and categorizing and defining religion in the first place.



Megan Goodwin 20:02

Yeah. So, we can talk about it, but first of all, this makes me a little bit itchy, and secondly, I will need examples in this conversation because you keep insisting that theory without examples is, uh... bullshit.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 20:18

I do. I'm right.



Megan Goodwin 20:19

Yeah.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 20:19

So let's go.



Megan Goodwin 20:20

You're not wrong. Okay! So, I like talking about divinity in Buddhism because it does not neatly map onto Abrahamic, and more specifically, like, Christian notions of God. Like, just from the jump: Buddhism does not have a notion of, like, a creator-god, some kind of omnipotent dude-in-the-sky (gendered language on purpose), but...



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 20:38



Sounds like a big but!



Megan Goodwin 20:40

I like big butts! I cannot lie. So, BUT! But that doesn't mean that there's no notion of divinity, or special beings, or not-quite-humans, or more-than-humans, or sacred knowledge. Strap in. I got some keywords to both shock and awe you with. Okay!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 20:55

Dope.



Megan Goodwin 20:56

Let's do this. So, there are small "B" buddhas-- \*Secret Word of the Day!\* --enlightened beings who have totally realized and comprehended the Four Noble Truths (more about those on the next episode as well). There are bodhisattvas-- \*Secret Word of the Day!\* --or folks who have awakened onto the path of becoming buddhas, but delayed passing into nirvana to help other folks achieve enlightenment. This is the part of the pod where I pause to share that I recently wondered aloud, and by aloud I mean on Twitter, whether Dolly Parton is a bodhisattva, and my mutual/close personal friend Levar Burton both liked AND prayer-handed that tweet, so I take this as confirmation of the Buddha nature both of Dolly Parton AND Levar Burton.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 21:39

Facts. I mean, that seems... that seems admissible in a court of law, so, go ahead.




Megan Goodwin 21:44


Mhm! Thank you. Anyway. There are wisdom kings-- \*Secret Word of the Day!\* --especially in Chinese Buddhism, who are sort of like embodiments of Buddha's compassion (and in paintings, they're super rad and fierce-looking); there are wrathful deities that cause trouble; then there are devas-- \*Secret Word of the Day!\* --who are deities but not necessarily Buddhist; and then there are also the local, cultural, traditional deities, divinities, not-humans, more than humans that show up in Buddhist practices, philosophies, stories, legends because-- you'll never believe this-- Buddhists are people who live in time and also space. No! I know. Which means that local ideas about spirits or ghosts or gods are humans with special powers or notions about ancestors and past lives and more-- all of these exist in and next to you and alongside other Buddhist ideas.




Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 22:22


Gasp. Whoa. That's so much.


 Megan Goodwin 22:38  
Uh huh!


 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 22:38  
And I know we didn't touch on terms like "sangha," "Four Noble Truths," "8-Fold path," all of which we will get to in the next episode, and that are at play here.


 Megan Goodwin 22:46  
Yes.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 22:48  
Whewpf!

 Megan Goodwin 22:48  
It's so much! It's so much. And... but wait, there's more. The long and the short of it, though, is: Buddhism is, for some folks, definitely a religion that has divine beings in it. Sometimes, the Buddha shows up on that list. For others, Buddhism isn't a religion at all! It's a way of life, and it's non-theistic because, as we already said, there isn't a creator-god in sight, and the whole idea is working on yourself while recognizing the interconnectedness of everything. That is quite the range, Blanche! We were NOT joking when we said that if Buddhism is what Buddhists do, then these are some messy, delightful, creative traditions.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 23:23  
Alright, well... that-- that's a lot. But I also want to say, I gave you hell with my wild questions this time. And it might be enough of us. I think this is a good moment to let an actual expert--

 Megan Goodwin 23:37  
Love it.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 23:38  
--the brilliant Dr. Chen, who is, I remind you, both an expert on Chinese Buddhism as well as a Buddhist nun. She's got a lot to teach us, and I'm really excited to hear what she's got to say.



M

Megan Goodwin 23:49

Yeah!

D

Dr. Dixuan Yujing Chen 23:52

Hello! My name is Dixuan Yujing Chen. My research and teaching focuses on Mahayana Buddhism, Buddhist practices and beliefs, and the history of Chinese Buddhism. I'm also interested in issues related to religious healing and health. I care that folks, my students, my neighbor, my mom, my nephew, know about what I study because religion is the essential part of human life. What I wish people knew about Chinese Buddhism is that don't confuse Chinese Buddhism with Tibetan Buddhism. It's very often people say that Tibet is located in part of China, so Tibetan Buddhism is the same as Chinese Buddhism. In reality, it's not true. Historically, they are different. Buddhism was introduced to China in the 1st century. On the other hand, Tibetan Buddhism developed from 7th or 8th century. Due to their different geographical location, they interact with different local culture. For example, Tibetan Buddhism has been influenced by cultures in north India and Nepal, but in Chinese Buddhism, many interact with Taoism and some folk religions in central China. Sometimes students feel confused about those two traditions. Another thing deserves our attention is that the Chinese government develops different attitudes toward traditions in Tibet and in mainland China. For Buddhism developed in mainland China, the Chinese government usually has a more generous attitude. But for Tibetan Buddhism, it's usually under more rigid control. Buddhist tradition in China and the West are very different. In the West, most popular one will be Zen. People are interested in mindfulness or meditation. They will say it's very relaxing, peaceful. So, I may hear people say "I'm so zen." They may be influenced by the counterculture movement in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. In East Asian countries, \*inaudible\* Korea, China, Japan, they have other forms, or other schools, of Buddhist tradition. For example, Tendai, or in Japanese, Tendai. T-E-N-D-A-I, Tendai. This school has philosophical analyses of doctrine. In Japan, it has been regarded as the most wonderful teaching of Buddha. In China, there are a monastery dedicated to Tendai practice and beliefs. But in the West, this tradition is relatively unknown. Another example that can illustrate the differences between Buddhism in China and the West is Pure Land tradition. In the West, almost everything is about Zen, but in China, the most popular one will be Pure Land Buddhism. The major belief in the Pure Land tradition is the power of Buddha Amitābha. According to the teachings in the Pure Land tradition, people rely on Amitābha Buddha's power to reach Pure Land. The Pure Land tradition is very much based on faith. Those people believe that if they deploy faith in Amitābha Buddha, then they will reach Pure Land after death. If compared with other Buddhist practice, it's relatively acceptable for most people, including those who are not interested in philosophical analysis or doctrine. So, it has been regarded as the easy path of practice. But in the West, Pure Land is less popular. I asked some Western Buddhists why they don't like Pure Land tradition. Their answer is that because it's very similar to salvation of God in Christianity, so they feel less and less attracted. But in Chinese Buddhism, almost every Buddhist temple incorporates Pure Land practice into their daily activities. It becomes the most prominent element of Buddhist tradition in China, and the same also applies to Korea and Japan. The believer in this tradition is that they will be reborn in Amitābha Buddha's Pure Land after death, so there are funeral rites and retreats associated with this tradition. The major practice in Pure Land tradition is devotional activities and develop faith in Amitābha Buddha. If we use ritual as the example, then we can see the differences between Chinese Buddhism and Buddhism in the West. The death rights and funeral service include recollecting Amitābha Buddha's name, chanting Amitābha Buddha

sutra, or visualizing Amitābha Buddha's Pure Land. The family will perform those ritual on behalf of the death and request Amitābha Buddha's blessing to help the death to gain good luck at the underworld and to help the death to be reborn in the Pure Land. This ritual is less popular among Western Buddhists. On the surface, it seems that developing faith in god-like figures seems very superstitious. So, American Buddhists preferred Zen or meditation. It seems that meditation is more logical, more reasonable. These phenomena tell us the Orientalist approach to see Buddhism in the West. People tend to assume that Zen is more logical, more scientific. In reality, religion has multiple dimensions, no matter the devotional practice or logical thinking. They are in terrible parts of religion. The Buddhist tradition in the world religion model has two major issue. The first issue is this term: Buddhism. Another issue is the past centuries in the world religion. The term Buddhism is problematic. It seems to present a single, unified religion. Buddhist traditions are multiple. The core of the Buddhist tradition is the Buddha's teaching, a so-called dharma. Not all of the Buddhists practice and believe in dharma the same way. We can use the term Buddhism in a conventional sense, but we shouldn't overlook its diverse, multiple angles. Another issue is text centralism in the world religion model. Sacred texts— Bible scriptures—are the center of world religions. Because Buddhism has classical texts, it seems it's civilized, well developed, just like Christianity, so Buddhism has been considered as part of world religions. But canonical text is only a small part of Buddhism. Buddhist tradition also has its own community, meditation, ritual, and priorities that may not be recorded in sacred texts. Texts are essential and significant, but Buddhist traditions have been developed for more than 2500 years. In the ancient times and medieval times, Buddhists were not always literate. Many of them were illiterate, and they were unable to read. The well-educated people were the minority. The majority of the Buddhists may never read any text that they exactly engage in practice. The dharma was the integral part of their daily life. In the contemporary Buddhism as well, not everyone is interested in scriptures. Our dietary habits, or our food choices, reflect our beliefs. Food choice in Buddhist traditions indicate the multiple angles and the complexity of this religion. Some people may say that “Oh, all of the Buddhists should be vegetarian.” Or some people may even say that “no, Buddhists should be vegan.” This is a controversial assumption. Some Buddhists decide to be a vegetarian because they believe that all human beings are interconnected. We, as human beings, we are interrelated with animals, environment, the Mother Earth— so being a vegetarian means their practice of compassion, their practice of non-killing, don't hurt any other animals, or protect their Mother Earth. But, if we trace the history back to the historical Buddha's time, monks ate whatever they received from lay people. Their practice of compassion was not to ask other people to kill, not commission any animals to be killed. So, contemporary Buddhists may accept meat-eating with a sense of gratitude toward food. The practice about meat-eating or not is actually illustrating multiple angles of Buddhist traditions. We should not judge someone because of their meat-eating, or saying that they are not Buddhist, they are not compassionate. There is one anecdote that I would like to share with you. When I did research in Taiwan, I interviewed Buddhists and asked their views towards Buddhist doctrines and to know whether they exactly study Buddhist scriptures, so-called sutra. In Taiwan, most people are literate. They are able to read, they are able to study, but they might not be interested in learning Buddhist sutras. I interviewed most Buddhists in the popular Buddhist temple, and I asked them two questions. The first question is: can you explain the Four Noble Truths? The second question is whether or not you study Agama or Nikāya sutra. Those texts are the very first Buddhist scriptures that represent early Buddhism. What surprised me was that about 70% of the people saying that they never study Agama or Nikāya, those early Buddhist texts, but they identify themselves as Buddhists, and they claim that they are sincere Buddhists. So I asked them, what do you do and why do you identify yourself as a Buddhist? They say, “I practice it. It's part of my daily life.” They may never study Buddhist doctrines, but they are the volunteers in the temple. Those Buddhists made new

friends in the temple, and they visit there regularly in order to establish social networks. This experience let me realize that we scholars always focus on doctrine, teachings, scriptures. But for people, they may care about their social life. Religion provides a way to bring people together. Most importantly, religion allows people to develop their own social life.

 Megan Goodwin 36:59

The best part of this extended season is how many folks are willing to share their expertise with us. Foreal, foreal.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 37:04

I agree completely.

 Megan Goodwin 37:06

What I hear Dr. Chen saying is that the world religions paradigm doesn't adequately get a Buddhism because, in part, it focuses on texts. Buddhism is unique, historic, and, of course textual, but as Dr. Chen tells us, Buddhism is so, so, so, so, so much more than texts.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 37:22

Yeah. I was really struck by her ethnographic work in Taiwan, where folks were identifying as Buddhists but weren't really claiming textual study, or doctrine, or teachings at all, but rather, the social life, the ritual life, the community-- almost like the way we think about religions, how we have to cite differences between canon, doesn't adequately get at how Buddhists are doing their thing or things.

 Megan Goodwin 37:45

Hmm, hmm. Religions remain more than texts. Interesting.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 37:50


Shock.

 Megan Goodwin 37:51


I know. And awe. But now it's time to move on to A Little Bit, Leave It!

 A Little Bit Leave It 38:00


\*A Little Bit, Leave It\*

 Megan Goodwin 38:03

Where we give you a little bit to leave you with. Clearly, the most important thing about this episode is the part where Levar Burton liked a thing I did. Because you know how I feel about PBS and the approval of my role models. But, I guess--

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 38:17


\*laughs\* Sure.

 Megan Goodwin 38:18

\*laughs\* I know! I know that. My therapist says it's growth. Anyway, I guess the most important thing about Buddhism on this episode, to my mind, anyway, is that Buddhism makes the world religions paradigm roster, NOT necessarily because of how big it is (like hi, hello Sikhi), but because it makes sense to the folks who created that model, because Buddhism is, to their minds, like Protestantism, like, eastern edition (even though Buddhism is millennia older than Protestantism). Which also makes me remember what Dr. Rashid said about the Catholic/Protestant divisions getting mapped on to, like, Sunni and Shi'i Muslim. So, once again, old white Western Christians have gotten their peanut butter-- and by peanut butter, I mean Jesus-- into the world's chocolate.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 39:01


That's a really grotesque image.

 Megan Goodwin 39:03

I know, right?

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 39:04

I'm picturing, like, a very sticky Jesus.

 Megan Goodwin 39:06

Well, I mean, it's got to be a chocolate Jesus if you listen to Tom Waits.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 39:10



I mean, fair, fair.



Megan Goodwin 39:11

Keeps me satisfied.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 39:13

Well... I'm not even gonna follow up on that. I'm just gonna say MY little bit, leave it.



Megan Goodwin 39:19

\*laughing\* I can't. No comment.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 39:21

That seems like a dicey place for a Jewess to touch. \*laughs\* In the world religions paradigm, she wrote in the script, Buddhism has an odd place of prominence at the same time that it experiences derision, which I think is something I want us to think about. So when it became understood in the West as a universal philosophy... if you stir that up with Orientalism, we can see how Buddhism is both everywhere and nowhere, sacred but also appropriated, frankly, like, more than any other tradition we've talked about so far. We see that appropriation in the, quote, "scientific" adoption of meditation or mindfulness, which comes from the so-called "universal" goods in Buddhism that can be totally lifted from these traditions, and used by all (which we wouldn't do with, say, mindful or meditative practices of that really specific, racially defined Islam). And we do see it in the Buddha planters at Lowe's. While we see Virgin Marys on all the lawns in Bergen County, New Jersey, we don't see them... frankly, desecrated in that way. We're not filling Mary's head with a spider plant.



Megan Goodwin 40:34

Oh, my god. No. Can you imagine? Oh, my-- I mean, I'm imagining it now, but ugh, no. Yes. Exactly.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 40:39

And so, I want us to hear that prominence of Buddha. He's at the Target. He's at the TJ Maxx. But also that derision. We've slapped a "For Sale" sign right on his face.



Megan Goodwin 40:50

Right!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 40:51

It's a lot.



Megan Goodwin 40:52

Yeah. And he winds up on clearance, like, somebody god's on clear-- well, that's a whole... yeah. \*sighs\* Well, if you don't know, now you know!



If You Don't Know, Now You Know 41:00

\*If You Don't Know, Now You Know!\*



Megan Goodwin 41:03

The segment in which we get one factoid each. So, you mentioned that Americans usually think of the Buddha as a big, fat, happy dude that they could buy at Lowe's to sit in their gardens, or, you know, fill his head with spider plants, which is going to haunt me for the rest of the day. Thank you for that. But, there are also representations of the Buddha that are emaciated, recalling his journey through deprivation to enlightenment (What up, the Middle Path!). One of my favorite pieces of Buddhist trivia-- one that totally messes with my students sense of Buddhism as, like, a nice, chill, aesthetically pleasing tradition, god/s or no god/s-- is that there are Buddhist sects that sit for days with decaying corpses to meditate on the impermanence of flesh. I learned about this in Barry Saunder's theories of the undead class in grad school. Corpse meditation is my factoid for today. You are welcome. Um, but actually, I remembered I had one more that I want to add. One of my all time favorite Tibetan Buddhist scholars, scholars of Tibetan Buddhism, Alison Melnick Dyer (who is in the homework for today) taught me that ewoks-- yes, like in a Star War-- speak Tibetan. The end. \*snickers\*



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 42:09

My, like, distaste for the Star Wars is--



Megan Goodwin 42:13

I know.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 42:13

--is outrageous. And a lot of it has to do with just, like, bad religious appropriation.





Megan Goodwin 42:17

Yeah! You're not wrong.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 42:18

And adopter enos! Just leave-- like, leave us alone. Leave us alone!



Megan Goodwin 42:23

LEAVE US ALONE, GEORGE LUCAS!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 42:25

Anyway, here's my factoid. As we said in our Hindu tradition episodes, Vishnu is a BIG, important Hindu deity, and is thought to have 10 incarnations on Earth-- two of the most-famous ones we said are Rama and Krishna. In some Vaishnava, or Vishnu lineages, the Buddha is understood as the ninth avatar of Vishnu.



Megan Goodwin 42:46

Okay.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 42:46

Okay, so let me say that again. Buddha is understood as the ninth avatar, or the ninth incarnation, of the Hindu deity, Vishnu, on Earth. So, that's a way that Hindu traditions made sense of this really important religious innovation within the same region, and at similar time periods. My one time advisor at Harvard Divinity School, Don Swearer, memorably talked about Buddha beyond boundaries, and this is one of those "religion is messy, and categories never work" facts that my students love, and that sticks with me many, many years later.



Megan Goodwin 42:48

What?! Interesting. Well, on that note, don't pack up yet, nerds. You have homework.



Simpsons 43:28

\*Homework?!\*



Megan Goodwin 43:29

As always, we've got citations, references, other goodies, and obviously transcripts stashed at keepingit101.com for every single episode. Check it out! Like every episode this megaseason, we want you to go and learn from our esteemed guest experts directly. So, Dr. Yujing Chen has a forthcoming book be called "Beyond Healing: The Worship of Medicine Master Buddha in China," so keep your eyes out for that. She also publishes in multiple languages, not all of which we can read, but we will stash those articles and links on the website in case those are languages you can read, nerds. On Buddhism broadly-- which I truly cannot stress enough, I know only enough about to pull off a day in global religions-- but I will just suggest some of my favorite pieces recently. Amy Paris Landenberg has a cool piece for Tricycle on Buddhism and consent culture called "Buddha Didn't Teach Ethics." Dr. Alison Melnick Dyer, whomst I already mentioned taught me that ewoks speak Tibetan-- I'm just gonna say it again because it bothers Ilyse-- so, Ali, Dr. Constance Kassor, and Dr. Ann Gleig all have episodes on Classical Ideas Pod. So, Dr. Melnick Dyer talks about Tibetan Buddhism, gender, and the life of Mingyur Peldron, who is one of these human, possibly more-than-human, resisting the language of saints figures in Tibetan Buddhism. Dr. Kassor talks about Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, and Dr. Gleig talks about Buddhism beyond modernity. I have also really appreciated Liz Kineke's work, particularly for Tricycle. So, she's got a bunch of pieces about Buddhism, in particular Buddhism going online in the time of COVID, but I also really like her stuff on sound bath meditation. So, that has been interesting. And then, finally, I both will and won't recommend the film "Little Buddha"--



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 45:19

Ohhh, no!



Megan Goodwin 45:20


Yeah-- 1993, a classic-- because it does, honestly, include some good scenes that explain basic tenets of Buddhism, like the explanation of the soul transmuted, like, water in a cup to water on the floor, always kind of sticks with me. But it is classic, good/bad/can't tell Keanu Reeves acting, except that in this case-- so terrible-- Keanu was playing the literal big "B" Buddha. I don't know that I like it, but it has stuck with me. End of homework.





Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 45:49


Alright. I can't really follow that up, so I'm just going to try anyway. Per usual, I'm going to refer us back to Tomoko Masuzawa yet again. Her chapter on Buddhism in "Invention of World Religions" is great for all of this history on how and why and when Buddhism "gets" to be a world religion-- and gets is obviously, like, quotes, underlined, bolded, side-eyed. There's Damien Keown's "Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction," that, frankly, did okay when I used to teach Buddhism as part of my South Asian religions course. I mean, it's, it's fine, and it does the basics. It's one of those very short introduction books. Then there's a new book called "Buddhism in 5 Minutes," but I listen to the podcast, I haven't read the book, so I've listened to an introduction about it on a podcast. So I'll link that for us in the show notes. Uh, Mitra Barua's "Seeding Buddhism with Multiculturalism: The Transmission of Sri Lankan Buddhism in Toronto" is a really great book that, actually, my students have clued me into having read it in Dr. Borchert's class!





 Megan Goodwin 46:57  
Nice!


 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 46:58  
So, it's a survey-driven, sociological work on how immigrant Sri Lankans are transmitting Buddhism in Toronto, famously not a Buddhist majority place.

 Megan Goodwin 47:08  
Mm!

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 47:09  
Jessica Falcone's "Battling the Buddha of Love: a Cultural Biography of the Greatest Statue Never Built" has a TON of stuff I love because it's about building a Buddha statue in India, like, as part of this global, international organization that is basically saying, "Buddha comes from India, and you don't have adequate Buddha statues," and then all of these local Indians are like, "Nah, get out. We have to save the land from you, comma, you Buddhist organization." It's a wild story, and a great read.

 Megan Goodwin 47:40  
Huh! Interesting.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 47:42  
Because we're in honor of Dr. Chen, there's a great piece on Buddhist nuns in China. You could read Jue Liang's piece in The Conversation called "Buddhist Nuns and Female Scholars Gaining New Leadership Roles." And special shoutout to my department colleague and former chair, Kevin Trainor, whose work on Sri Lankan Buddhist ritual is, like, a really big deal. It's a classic in the field, in fact. So, his classic book is called "Relics, Ritual, and Representation in Buddhism: Rematerializing the Sri Lankan Theravada Tradition." I'll stop there!

 Megan Goodwin 48:13  
Yay! Big thanks to those of you writing reviews on Apple podcasts, Amazon, and Google. It really helps. And if you want to be a Nerd of the Week, you write us a review! That's how we can see your silly handle, you sillies! Our Nerds of the Week this time are: Ashely Reed, whomst I love, all of the Spotify users who can't write us reviews-- shoutout to you-- and Kevin, who might-not-should-count but also-- yeah, you know, because he's, you know, Ilyse's partner-- but he wrote us a review! So, thank you K-fresh.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 48:43

Join us next time for more HISTORY OF THE WORLD (RELIGIONS) PART 1, when we chat MORE about Buddhism and are helped out by guest expert, Dr. Thomas Borchert!



Megan Goodwin 48:52

Yay! Shoutout to our research assistant, Alex Castellano, whose transcription work makes this pod accessible and therefore awesome. Need more religion nerderie? You know you do, and you know where to find us. The answer, as always, is Twitter.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 49:06

And you can find Megan on Twitter @mpgPhD and me @ProfIRMF, or the show @KeepingIt\_101. Find our website at [keepingit101.com](http://keepingit101.com). Check us out on Instagram! And with that... peace out, nerds!



Megan Goodwin 49:23

Do your homework! It's on the syllabus.



Bonus Ending 49:46

\*Ewoks from Star Wars\*