

# Scott Mitchell TBR Interview

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## SPEAKERS

Scott Mitchell, Ann Gleig, Adeana McNicholl

### **Adeana McNicholl** 00:00

Alright. Hello, my name is Dr. Adeana McNicholl. I'm an assistant professor in Religious Studies at Vanderbilt University. I'm here with Dr. Ann Gleig, Associate Professor of religion and Cultural Studies at the University of Central Florida. We're here today as part of the Teaching Resources for Buddhism, Race and Racism Project hosted at "teachingbuddhism.net", and funded by the Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation at the University of Toronto. We're joined today by Dr. Scott Mitchell. Dr. Mitchell is the Reverend Yoshitaka Tamai Professor of Jodo Shinshu Buddhist Studies and Dean of Student and Faculty Affairs for the Institute of Buddhist studies. We're going to be discussing his syllabus "Topics in Buddhism in the West: Critical Race Theory and American Buddhism". Welcome, Dr. Mitchell.

### **Scott Mitchell** 00:42

Thank you.

### **Ann Gleig** 00:44

So, Scott, we were very inspired by your syllabus, and we just wanted to ask a few questions to kind of get more context for it. So we wanted to start with some questions on the institutional context. So can you tell us a little bit about the type of institution that you teach in and taught this course in, and give us a sense of the student demographics?

### **Scott Mitchell** 01:14

Yeah, so the Institute of Buddhist studies is a graduate school in a Buddhist seminary. So as a graduate program, most of our students tend to be, they're not undergraduates, obviously, I would say the majority of our students are going in to careers either as a Buddhist minister, or a Buddhist priest, or a Buddhist chaplain, and many of our students are returning to graduate school after some time away from academia. So I would imagine that the sort of average age of our students is somewhere in the mid to late 30s. Generally speaking, the last time I ran the numbers I think that we had a pretty even split in terms of gender, as well as the majority of our students being either asian or white. The last time we did all this was a few years ago, so these things tend to shift, as you know. Other than that, we're a small graduate school in Berkeley, California. So Berkeley being Berkeley, politically, most of our

students tend to a particular side of the spectrum, but I think probably the most important thing to know about the Institute of Buddhist Studies is that we're really at this intersection between scholars and practitioners, we take the academic study of Buddhism very seriously. It's a rigorous program, it's designed to give students a really good firm foundation, not only in the variety of the different Buddhist traditions in the world, but also in Buddhist studies as an academic discipline. But as I said, since most of our students are actually going into careers of service, so to speak, either as chaplains or ministers, they're also encouraged to take that academic study of Buddhism and apply it in a more practical way. So I think it's a little bit different than you might expect at a university or more traditional, so to speak, graduate program.

**Ann Gleig** 03:26

Great, I'll be curious as to know how the distinct demographic of the student body worked with the syllabus, if it did work in a distinct way?

**Adeana McNicholl** 03:39

Also I want to ask about the curricular context of the program and that this course is in. Was it filling any sort of general education requirements for the students? How many students were in the class?

**Scott Mitchell** 03:54

Yeah, so the course itself was an advanced seminar. It didn't actually meet any requirements. Generally speaking, I teach one or two classes a year. Every year I teach a sort of survey course on Buddhism in the West, which focuses mostly on the United States, and then when I have the time or the desire, I can teach them advanced seminar that focuses on a particular topic. So the 2016 election of the current occupant of the White House was not well received among our community, and there was a lot of angst around a lot of issues that were going on in America around race. Then in 2018, maybe 2019, somewhere in there, I happened upon a syllabus online that was originally written by Adrienne Keene, who's an assistant professor of American Studies at Brown University. She developed this course on critical race theory and that was sort of my inspiration for doing a topics course specifically on this intersection between race and particularly American Buddhism. I really appreciated looking at it from the point of view of critical race theory, as a sort of organizing field or discipline, so to speak. Critical race theory and race theory more generally always come up in my courses on American Buddhism, I think that it would be irresponsible not to talk about racism when you're talking about American Buddhism, not just in terms of the two Buddhisms thing or converts, and whatever else, but the longer history of Asian-Americans in this country, racism against Japanese Americans, so to speak, for example. So having this syllabus to provide a sort of coherent, semester long way to look at a particular topic was really interesting to me. So that's pretty much where I started, was with Professor Keene's syllabus, and chose to look at it through the lens of critical race theory. In part because critical race theory actually comes out of legal theory, which I'm not an expert in, it was a leap for me, this is one of the reasons why I love teaching undergraduate programs, because you can use your courses as ways to extend your own research and your own knowledge and work with students, which was really wonderful. But also, I think legal theory is actually really interesting when we're talking about race, because racial categories are often very much enacted by law, by precedent. One of my go to stories is a Japanese immigrant who sued the United States government to become a citizen in the early 20th century, and the rationale he gave for why he should be allowed to become a citizen wasn't because

everybody should be able to become a citizen, he said I should become a citizen because Japanese people are white people. So here's this legal case that's trying to define the category of whiteness, and what does that mean? Of course, the Supreme Court says no, and that further clarifies what it means to be white. So looking at race through this lens of the law, and how that shapes our experiences, I thought was really, really interesting. So that's sort of how the class came into being. Your question about how many students were in the class, and Ann's question about the demographic makeup of a particular class, despite how interesting I thought the topic was, and despite how much I thought our students would really love this class, I actually didn't get a very high enrollment. I think I had a total of six students, which is not bad. As a graduate school, most of our seminars are pretty small, which is a nice thing when you're doing a graduate seminar, especially for a difficult topic. But two of the students were actually just auditing the class, they were very much engaged, but it was a different kind of engagement. Two other students were in their last semester of the program, and so they were finishing their thesis and kind of not quite as engaged as you might be, and so there was sort of a mixture of willingness, or ability I should say, not willingness, but ability to really engage in some of these topics. It was a pretty small group which in some ways was good because everybody knew each other pretty well, so it was a very cohesive group. When I first designed this course I was of course nervous about the possibility of having a very large group with many different personalities and having to manage different people's experiences with racism, and, you know, Americans are not good at talking about race. So I was nervous about how that would go over. So having a smaller class actually, I think, worked out pretty well, because everybody, like I said, was very familiar with one another. We were able to have some good conversations.

**Ann Gleig** 09:24

So I'm curious about the kind of difference between the expectation of student enrollment and the actuality of student enrollment. We also had a similar case of that in my department with a critical race theory class. Do you have any thoughts on what might attract or cause apprehension in students around classes on race and Buddhism?

**Scott Mitchell** 09:51

That's a good question. For our institutional context, I think, to sort of step back from this particular course, what I've noticed is that we have a lot of requirements for some of our students who are going into these professional fields, and there's not a lot of space for electives. So I think that that's part of the issue, was just with our institutional context, students have to do a lot of things, taking a course on critical race theory might be really interesting, but if it's not directly relevant to their program, they have to make that choice. I do think that there was probably some hesitancy on some people's parts. I'm not quite sure how to phrase this, but both sort of positive and negative hesitancy, like that negative hesitancy of, I don't want to take this class because it might be difficult or a topic I don't want to discuss, it's going to bring up difficult issues, all those kinds of anxieties people have about talking about racism, on the one hand. On the other hand, I think that there's again, going back to my particular context being in Berkeley, I think that there's definitely a sense that many people have that they already are woke, so they don't need to learn more about this, which is a different issue. So that, I think, was probably one reason why I was a little bit bummed out about it, that not more people signed up for the course, not that I think that my students are not properly enlightened in that sense of the word, but that I hoped that more people would be willing to sort of engage and learn in this way. The only real negative impact I

think this had on how I ran the course of the semester was that I designed it with this idea that students would lead the class every week, but with so few students and some of them being auditors, the students had to sort of double up and do more work than I think that they would have if there was a larger class and we could spread out the weekly leading of the class.

**Ann Gleig** 12:07

Yeah, just as a follow up to that though, I think that point about the elective possibly impacting enrollment, I think that is something really interesting to think about, because I guess most religious studies programs also have different categories, and certainly in our program, like with perhaps a course like this would best fit under the theory kind of requirement, or it could also go in the religion and race, critical race theory. But we find that because there's less classes offered in the theory section, and theory is a requirement, that would actually encourage enrollment. So I think I just want to highlight that point that as you were talking, I was thinking, oh, I hadn't thought about that in terms of like where would one place a course related to Buddhism and race, and how that might kind of impact enrollment, which is for a lot of us I think a real concern. Like at my institute our classes get cancelled all the time. We have a 30 person minimum, and we usually make the class if we get into like the 20s, but otherwise the class can get cancelled.

**Scott Mitchell** 13:29

I think that's really important to think about institutional contexts and what the requirements are of a particular program.

**Adeana McNicholl** 13:35

Okay, so I want to ask about the teaching methodology for this class. You've mentioned briefly that you'd been hoping that it would be more student led, so how did it actually play out? What kind of learning objectives did you have for the course? How did you evaluate students in terms of whether or not they met those objectives? And what did your typical class sessions look like?

**Scott Mitchell** 14:02

So when I first designed that I relied heavily on Professor Keene's syllabus, and she had this structure to the class where every week she was going to start, and when I adopted this, every week we're going to start with a check in, and I think I called this something like "what happened in race in America today?", and it would be a chance for us to think about a news item or an event and sort of analyze it from this point of view of critical race theory. That went away pretty quick. That turned out to be something that didn't really work very well at all, and I don't think it worked for a couple of reasons. On the one hand, sometimes people would say, so-and-so celebrity did this dumb thing, and half the class was like, I don't know who that is, and then we'd have to spend time catching people up on pop culture. So that was sort of awkward, and then it would turn into just sort of like complaining about how terrible things are, which wasn't particularly helpful, and I think what I realized was it's kind of a big ask to say, we're going to look at some events in the media, and then we're going to analyze it using these tools that we're learning here in critical race theory, but we actually haven't learned the tools yet so we don't know how to do that work. So if I had to do it again, I might want to actually like flip that and say, let's start doing that halfway through the semester once we've got some theory under our belts, or I might even want to be more proactive in terms of me actually doing it me bringing in some event and doing

some media analysis or something like that to demonstrate exactly what it was that I was looking for. I had a similar experience with the student led parts of the class, where some students were really good with like reading one of the assigned essays and then responding to it in a very coherent, organized way. Other students weren't, and so those conversations tended to be hit or miss. Again, I don't know, this might just be my own experience with teaching, there's definitely this back and forth I have of wanting students to really engage in and take the lead on something, and realizing that as the expert in the room I need to at least provide some structure to the conversation and some guiding questions or whatnot. So those were some things that did work and didn't work. Again, the learning objectives that I developed, once we got into the semester I kind of let a lot of that go and really spent the time just working with the students to work through some of the theory stuff and really dive deep into some of these issues, and didn't worry so much about the learning objectives, per se. Again, I had six students in the class, two of whom were auditing it so they weren't getting a grade, one of the students was one of my doctoral advisees who was in one of those semesters where he said yes to everything and was completely burned out. So a lot of the requirements that I had gone in thinking that we're going to do all these things, many of them sort of got pulled back just because of the nature of the students who were in the class, and the subject matter itself. Interestingly, we were having a faculty meeting yesterday, and I was sort of thinking about this conversation, based on something that one of my colleagues said, about the way that he was running his class of actually having students read out loud things that they were working on, and that they were working on together. I think that might have actually been a better way of doing some of this stuff, saying, let's just focus in on a text, particularly the really difficult critical race theory stuff which is this interplay of sociological stuff with pretty intricate legal theory. I'm bringing in Kimberlé Crenshaw, for example, and this other stuff that can be really, really dense if you haven't had any exposure to it. I think that having time in class really focusing in on a piece of writing might have been really, really helpful. There's one thing that I've thought about. The other thing I would say is that I intended when I designed the course to sort of pull from lots of different sources, and that may have been slightly overwhelming for the students. I sometimes think that it might be better to have a single text that students work with, particularly in this area. If I had just spent the first half of the semester reading racial formation, for example, that might have been a better way for students to just sort of get a good grasp on critical race theory, and then use that to transition into a more focused conversation or applied conversation on American Buddhism. So those are my reflections on what I did wrong. But I do think that probably one of the biggest takeaways is that I did really throw a whole lot of stuff on them in the first part of the semester, and a lot of things worked and a lot of things didn't. I think having a focused single text might have been a better approach. Did that answer anything?

**Ann Gleig** 19:36

I mean, I'm really hearing that less is more with the kind of foundational critical race theory at the start, and maybe just an assumption that this is new material for the students, and just kind of immersing them in one source rather than hitting them from several angles. I'm curious as to your thoughts of, say there's a professor who isn't very well versed in critical race theory, but is inspired and wants to engage questions of race and has a sincerity and an integrity around the questions. Do you have any recommendations for that kind of professor, imagined professor?

**Scott Mitchell** 20:27

Yeah, Omi and Winant's book "Racial Formations" is great. I think that's from a more sociological perspective, which depending on the professor or their expertise might be more approachable. I believe that the original book was from the late 90s, I think, and there's a more updated, more recently revised edition. So that's, I think, a really good book. One of the required books for the course I ran was Delgado and Stefancic... I'm gonna mispronounce words as well, not just you. They have a book called "Critical Race Theory: An Introduction", and it's really concise, it's very straightforward. Again, it's from critical legal theory so it's focused more on issues that have come up in the law, but a lot of those issues, I think, are pertinent to non legal specialists, right? They talk about issues I think you'll be familiar with if you're not familiar with law but you're familiar with the issues of race and racism. So that would be, I think, a good introduction that somebody could just focus on that. I didn't require that for this book. But really, it's like 100 pages long, it's not very long and so for a graduate seminar I felt like I had to do more. But I agree with you on that sometimes less is more, that sometimes it makes more sense to just focus in on particular issues, or a particular text in order to give students a good, firm foundation. This class, I think, also predated some really good scholarship that's been done on American Buddhism and racism. So now that other work has been published, I think I might rethink the back half of the class as well.

**Ann Gleig 22:20**

Great, do you think you could teach a class on this topic, on race, and racism and Buddhism or American Buddhism without specifically engaging in critical race theory? Like just go into the Buddhist sources? Because as you say, there is this growing body of really good work coming out, primary and secondary work. Could you imagine tackling a class and just saying, I'll put the critical race theory aside and we'll just jump into history and ethnography?

**Scott Mitchell 22:57**

Yeah, I definitely do, especially after the experience of... I think all the sources I use and all the research I did in order to make this class happen was really invaluable. It was a really great experience. So to put this together and to push myself into... a lot of this stuff has been a part of my scholarship, postcolonial theory has definitely been a part of my scholarship, race theory has been a part of my scholarship, but to be able to focus in on critical race theory as a particular discipline and really expand my knowledge in that area was very, very helpful and rewarding. But no, I don't think it's actually necessary. Like, I could imagine doing this class again without ever having to go down that road, or maybe again assigning the introductory book as a supplemental reading for students, just to give them some background information if they feel like they don't have enough, the foundation would be useful. But the other thing I've been thinking about is there's a part of me that also feels like I don't think I want to teach this class again, because I think that some of what we did in that class needs to happen across the curriculum, right? It needs to happen kind of everywhere, like you should have critical race theory or talking about racism or talking about these issues needs to happen in other classes, and it shouldn't be, quite frankly, it shouldn't be segregated out into its own thing, but it should be as part of the broader curriculum. I've already had this experience where this last spring one of the discussions that we had from the critical race theory, I brought it into my regular survey for American Buddhism, and I think that that's probably where I'll end up going in the future, is not necessarily having just a focussed class on this topic, but making sure that I incorporate this stuff more intricately, integrated more better, into my regular teaching. It's the end of the day, I'm sorry.

**Ann Gleig** 25:03

Yeah, no, that really makes sense though, I think we're both shaking our heads, aren't we? Vigorously here.

**Adeana McNicholl** 25:09

Well, I think we've already used way too much of Dr. Mitchell's time, and so we should probably wrap up and thank him so much for sharing his experience with teaching Buddhism and critical race theory, and for giving us some insights. So thank you.

**Ann Gleig** 25:30

Thank you.

**Scott Mitchell** 25:31

Thank you.