III. Embracing Tradition
ELAINE LAI Interview

WELCOMED: Welcome is interested in how people live their faith and moral commitments within a modern university. Some philosophical traditions have treated religion as primarily private. But lived faith is often present in how people choose, teach, relate, and make meaning. How does your own story affirm, resist, or complicate that Western "private religion" framing?

Elaine Lai: I was raised Buddhist by my Taiwanese mother and grandmother. My grandmother passed away many years ago, but Buddhism was part of my earliest memories. And then, for a long time, I rejected it.

Part of this resistance to my background was social. Buddhism was stigmatized in the neighborhood where I grew up. Most people around me were Jewish or Christian, and nobody really understood Buddhism. I wanted to be like all the other kids. At that time, "being American" felt like a stand-in for being white, and I wanted to fit that image, so I rejected my Buddhist roots.

After my undergraduate years, I moved to Asia for about ten years, and that journey actually brought me back to Buddhism. I was doing a lot of different things during that time. In my corporate work, I didn't align with the specific kinds of products we were promoting (some of which were not environmentally sustainable). It felt like a mismatch at a very basic level. During that period of time, I began turning to Buddhism, this time by immersing myself more deeply in practice and study. I ended up studying at monasteries in Taiwan and Nepal, and I spent a significant amount of time in India. Eventually, the only thing I wanted to do was to study Buddhism, so I came to Stanford in 2018 for a PhD in Buddhism. I finished in 2024, and now I'm a lecturer here.

WELCOMED: Did Buddhism give you language for that mismatch in the corporate world, like the idea of "right livelihood"?

Elaine Lai: In the corporate world, yes. Although what I experienced may not be representative of all corporations, in general, it felt like money was always the bottom line. In some ways, I feel grateful that I didn't build a longer corporate career, because I think it would have created much deeper internal conflict for me over time.

WELCOMED: When you returned to Buddhism more seriously, what did that look like in community terms at a place like Stanford?

Elaine Lai: When I was a graduate student, I helped revamp the Buddhist community at Stanford. I felt more connected to Buddhism as a community while I was at Stanford than I had felt as a child, living in the suburbs where there were no other Buddhists. And in Asia, it was different too: in many of the communities I was a part of, Buddhism was simply the baseline. At Stanford, however, I had to do a lot of work to create it from scratch and to make it friendly to a more general audience.

Buddhism can look very different depending on where and how you encounter it. There isn't a centralized Buddhist authority in the way some religions have centralized structures. Historically, Buddhism transformed in many ways as it moved across regions and cultures, and the religion is still changing today.

Here, in Silicon Valley, I've noticed some misunderstandings about Buddhism. I often want to ask: where are you getting your Buddhism from? Is it from a mindfulness movement? Is it from a popular "Wisdom" book? Or is it from a community with deep lineage practice? Those sources may sometimes overlap, but they aren't the same thing. In the United States, mindfulness is a major point of entry, and it can be beneficial for some people—but it can also flatten what Buddhism is. Without a greater grounding in Buddhist ethics, mindfulness can be misappropriated.

For me, I practice Vajrayana Buddhism, and that means teacher relationships matter. Not in the sense that teachers should be idealized or treated as perfect, but in the sense that certain practices require guidance, accountability, and long-term observation between the teacher and the student. Being a teacher is not a quick credential. It's not "I meditated for 200 hours" and now I'm a teacher. It's a lifelong process of learning how your mind works and how you relate to other beings. Students must observe whether a teacher is truly walking the path, and the teacher must likewise observe whether the student is open to transformation, or if they are looking for a quick-fix to Band-Aid their ego instead.

There's a temptation to imagine Buddhism as pure, or naturally non-hierarchical, or automatically free of harm. That's not realistic. Every person has to investigate what traditions they are entering, what they're learning, and what kinds of authority structures they are stepping into. In the West, sometimes Buddhism can be idealized, especially by people who are disappointed with another religious tradition or with religious authority in general. But people should still ask hard questions about power, patriarchy, and authority, because Buddhism arose from those dynamics as well. These dynamics are still very present today. It's very important to have a good Buddhist teacher who can help you understand the traditions and practices and mentor you in the right way. I have been so fortunate to have several good teachers as role models. The biggest lesson they have taught me is to never give away my own power, and to

cultivate discernment and wisdom so that I can be fluid in how I respond to this very uncertain world.

WELCOMED: You teach in the COLLEGE curriculum now. Does your Buddhist practice and view of teaching express itself in your own pedagogy?

Elaine Lai: Some students choose me as a teacher because of my Buddhist background, but the courses in the COLLEGE program have no specific focus on religious studies. There are very small units on religion in some courses, but usually we're not "talking about Buddhism" as such.

Just as some students have a particular faith tradition that informs how they see the world, Buddhism plays a role in how I view my responsibilities as a teacher. Buddhism informs my teaching through values and orientation more than through explicit content: how I think about attention, responsibility, suffering, compassion, and what it means to relate to other people in a classroom. Ultimately, I hope every student can become a Buddha.

WELCOMED: What does becoming a Buddha mean in a Stanford context?

Elaine Lai: In the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions I practice, there's an idea that every being has Buddha-nature, or has the potential to awaken. So the question becomes: what would it mean to nurture that potential in a space like Stanford?

For me, it's not about making the classroom "religious." It's about shaping a way of being in the world. It's about connection: to other people, to the environment, to institutions, to the consequences of our actions. If I'm teaching from that ethos, then I hope students leave with a stronger ability to act from compassion and discernment rather than from fear, a desire for status, or even isolation.

Stanford gives students many messages about what success looks like. I hope students can recognize what actually matters to them in the long run, and carry that forward—during their time at Stanford and beyond.

WELCOMED: Last question. Some Western moral frameworks place humans at the top of a hierarchy, where dignity and obligation are largely human-centered. Does Buddhism offer you a different account of moral authority and moral obligation?

Elaine Lai: Yes. We can see many destructive consequences when we assume human supremacy: in climate disaster, in how institutions and industries operate, in how "progress" gets narrated as permission to dominate.

One of the parts of Buddhism I love, especially philosophically, is its insistence on interdependence. Everything is connected. Everything is made of multiple causes and conditions. Humans are not separate from the natural world. So there's no reason to create a moral system that treats everything else as merely instrumental for the benefit of a select group of humans. As history has shown, when we fall into the logic of human supremacy, it becomes very dangerous. The logic of supremacy of any kind has been misused to justify exploitation of lands, peoples, causing suffering for so many beings (human and non-human), in the long term. Ultimately, Buddhism has taught me that to resist these cycles of suffering, we must dismantle all notions of the Other. This is not easy work, but it is work that will help us get to the root of our current problems, and hopefully find a more sustainable way to be in relationship with each other and with our shared home.