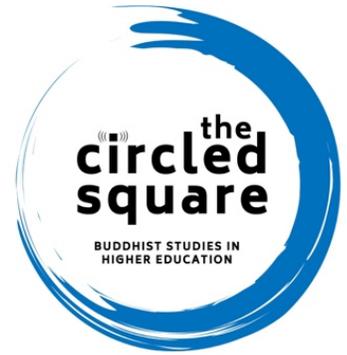


Episode 13: Embodied Learning on Interdependence

File Length: 00:40:44

Speakers:

Sarah Richardson
Xinran Huang
Aaron Marshall
Richard Wu
Sally Andrews
Sam Keravica



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Xinran: For me, actually, it was like transforming personally. So I wasn't just learning something, but I was learning also about myself, and my thoughts changed and evolved as I learned more about myself, and about interdependence and the course content.

00:00:21:11 - 00:01:15:13

Sarah: Hello and welcome to this episode of The Circled Square, the podcast where we talk about teaching in Buddhist studies. In this episode, we're doing something different. Rather than interview people who teach in Buddhist studies, as I usually do, for this episode I've spoken with students about their experiences in one specific, and different kind of course. This was a course taught by my colleague, Frances Garrett, at the University of Toronto called "Interdependence". It was a third-year undergraduate course in the fall of 2019. Now, at first you may think there's nothing unusual about a Buddhist studies course on the topic of interdependence or interdependent origination... It's a core Buddhist concept that describes how everything is connected by cause and effect and is in constant flux. But after personally hearing a lot about how unusual this course was in its execution, I decided I really wanted to hear from the students of this course about their perspectives on what happened in this unusual learning experience.

00:01:16:11 - 00:02:25:01

Sarah: So here you're going to hear excerpts of interviews with five of the students from the class. This is a compilation of their voices, and we're about to jump right into a kind of intense experience that the group had on the very last day of the semester, something they built towards all term that really generated a powerful and moving experience for many of them. Before I turn you over to the students, let me explain a bit about the course overall. Throughout the semester students read and discussed Buddhist source texts in translation, writings by contemporary Buddhists, and secondary scholarship by philosophers, as well as scientists who've been influenced by Buddhist ideas of interdependence. So they read Nagarjuna and other Buddhist philosophers, as well as some more unusual readings, like a book by a biologist, Kriti Sharma, called *Interdependence, Biology and Beyond*, and Alexis Shotwell's *Beyond Purity*, a book about ethics, change, and social movements. In this writing intensive course, students

did weekly philosophically or phenomenologically-oriented reflective writing. So please see our website notes for a full course description.

00:02:26:02 - 00:02:56:21

Sarah: But in the class time, as you'll hear, students did unusual things. It was really structured around experiential and embodied learning. And in this class, Frances had students up out of their seats in an effort to help them feel interdependence with their bodies. They laid on the ground, they did breathwork together, they used a three-dimensional geodesic dome to put photos representing their lives into relationship with one another. They really built community.

00:02:58:08 - 00:03:39:25

Sarah: These interviews were conducted about six months after the class, a few months into the COVID-19 pandemic. The students all talk about how the course had left an imprint on them in these months afterwards, and in particular, how studying the topic of interdependence influenced their experiences during this strange pandemic. Part of what I liked hearing from these students is what they remembered about the course these months later, how the course continued to have meaning in their lives, both intellectually and personally. So without further delay, I'll give you to the students themselves. You'll hear from Xinran Huang, Sam Keravica, Sally Andrews, Richard Wu, and Aaron Marshall. Enjoy.

00:03:42:12 - 00:04:41:11

Sam: I thought more courses should really be like this. I think it's such a fulfilling and engaging learning experience that makes it really memorable, and probably one of the most memorable learning experiences that I've had in my university career. I think given the nature of the topic of interdependence and emptiness and Buddhist philosophy, setting up the course to be very activity-based and experiential serves the material so well, and it's really necessary that we go beyond just an intellectual discussion of these ideas. I think that when we were doing this we were disclosing like complexities of our experience in our lives that aren't often shared, and this made the classroom a really great place to be.

00:04:44:23 - 00:06:27:22

Sally: There was a lot of challenge around figuring out what we would do as a community at the end, and the idea of presenting ourselves on the last day within, I think it was five photos, pictures, drawings, of where we were, who we were to each other and then connecting it on a dome came together and we had time to do that. There was a big step to get to the point where I really was comfortable with me, and I chose my pictures very carefully and I think having heard the rest of the class present themselves, I think everybody did choose very mindfully, very carefully, and very trustingly. Because there were things that we didn't know about people, you know, and then when we all hung ourselves on the connecting dome, and we all just stood there... It was this silence. It was uncertainty, what to do, but not an uncomfortable silence. And we experimented with picking it up, because it was a movable dome, picking it up and being within everybody... Holding it over you could see it from a completely different angle, looking at it, moving it, and talking a bit about our individual process of choosing.

00:06:28:21 - 00:08:03:03

Sally: In my case, I didn't include Peter... And other people had other things that they had or didn't have in theirs. So we entered the final phase, which was sharing a new type of breathwork. At first, it was awkward for me. There I was lying on the floor, I had laid on the floor a lot throughout the course, and yet you're very conscious because you're breathing differently, you're breathing very loudly, and you can hear other people at the start. It didn't take long before, for myself, I became quite part of it. You know, I was totally there. It was very moving. And so you're doing this breathing, which is physically challenging, and you're getting so much oxygen, you wouldn't want to stand up suddenly. I think I would have been dizzy, but you don't feel sick or anything. And then when you stop, and your body is sort of driving or electric on this oxygen, there's nothing else going on but that moment, and it was fabulous.

00:08:04:18 - 00:10:24:19

Sally: But what it did for me, it opened up a little glimpse of what it might be... I'm not Buddhist either, but what it might be to experience that intense, meditative moment. It was just this glimpse, but it was fabulous, and then at the end, as we all slowly came back as a community, because that was very individual even though we were doing it together. It was a very close time to say goodbye. We left the dome, and Dr. Garrett with a lot of physical hugs, and went on, you know? It was a very good way to get a different view of what I'd read about in Tibetan Buddhism, I took the Himalayan Buddhism course... It sounds corny, but it was a form of a high that was very electric in your body, and yet you did it to yourself, with yourself. So a couple of the readings gave you hints over the years of people who have strived to be enlightened... I have a friend who has become a Lama, a Tibetan Lama, and I got in touch with her. She says that it's something that even within their practice that that total oneness with whatever you're doing happens. It was... What a way to do it, to discover that that is not just possible, you actually see that happen. This is not a pretend study of something in the past, historic meditation practice or anything else, it's... Yeah, it was an amazing last class.

00:10:27:19 - 00:12:56:04

Sam: Yeah, so while we're in this exercise, my body begins to tense up, I just start receding into myself, almost. My hands clench up like claws, my arms pull in towards my chest, my shoulders tense up towards the top of my head, and I'm really just there, like, writhing on the floor a little bit. And at some point, I suddenly began to think of my elementary school librarian, who had probably not crossed my mind for at least a decade, and he had suffered a stroke and had lost some control in about half of his body that looked very similar to the way that I was tensed up. You know, when we were young, we used to mock him for it, 'cuz kids are just real nasty sometimes. But now, during this experience, I was feeling this really deep sense of compassion and empathy for him, and thinking about what a terrible, scary thing it is to experience something like that and to lose some of the flexibility and autonomy that we have over our bodies. As the breathing exercise was coming closer to the end, when we started breathing normally again, you're sort of thrown into this sensitive and emotionally suggestible altered state of consciousness, and so I'm slowly coming down and I'm regaining the sensitivity in my body and in my hands, able to control my fingers again, and I just touched the grooves on the

yoga mat, I'm feeling the little fibers that are sticking up out of the carpet and I just began to cry pretty strongly, thinking like, wow, what an amazing, beautiful thing our bodies are and this intimate sensory connection we have to the world that's mediated like this... I had an incredible sense of gratitude and awe at what my body was and what it gives me. It was pretty powerful.

00:12:59:11 - 00:15:37:03

Sally: Oh, I did cry during the actual practice and it wasn't anything to do with Peter. It was something conjured up related to a friend of mine on my fiftieth birthday. When I turned 50, I spent the year celebrating. Every time something wonderful happened to me, I'd say "that's because it's my fiftieth birthday". And that year, a friend of mine, I bought a kayak that year, and he and I just lay on the beach, because he's also a kayaker, and I remembered him. And I miss him. What that practice did was, in preparation for it, I found out that memory isn't real, it's practiced. And Peter will... I'm gonna cry again, Sorry. Peter will always be with me. He is now no longer with me as a man, ravaged, physically, mentally...When I see him, he is a healthy man in his early 60s as opposed to mid 60s and a disaster... Um, so not putting him in was an active decision. I left him on the kitchen counter, I had him there with me, but I did not take him because our life is over... So, sad still, different sad... I have since had a dream of Peter, which will stay with me forever. One night he came to me in a dream, but it didn't feel like it, and he actually stood at the bed saying, "just checking in, how are you?", and that was about a month after the course ended. His body was healthy, his mind was healthy, and I can't even imagine him now the way he was. Although I am very sad still, it's better, it is better because I can be sad and OK with it. I know it doesn't sound like I am, but I really am.

00:15:53:26 - 00:16:39:07

Xinran: I feel a lot more connected towards... I felt really connected towards my classmates and the instructor throughout the course, because we were very close in our discussions. Before I did hear about, and I knew the meaning of interdependence, but it was more like a knowledge instead of experience. In the course, I felt like the way the course was conducted, I actually had hands on experience of interdependence and how that feels like. It was an experience that was, I felt like, it was personally transforming because it really brought about a new kind of understanding for me of that concept.

00:16:41:12 - 00:18:12:21

Richard: I think that... So, it's actually part of the class work where we engaged with each other both at the sort of more affective level, as well as at the intellectual level. So intellectually, of course, we have the seminar discussions about what we think about the readings, critical reflections, and sometimes even argumentations about what we take from the readings, and on the more affective side, we were also encouraged to practice things like mindful listening, where it's sharing each other's experience, where the listener would just sit open and attentive without making any comments or talking back to the person, we just purely listen and attend to what the person has to say, and that's one way in which, actually, I was surprised to find that even though you're not talking with the person in the usual way, in this back and forth kind of way, you actually end up learning a whole lot more about what the person has to say in the

sense that you're more able to relate to the person at the sympathetic level, as opposed to just trying to come up with things to say. So you experience the other person in a more open way.

00:18:13:23 - 00:19:32:15

Richard: Interdependence, to me, was a very complicated and subtle Buddhist concept, a concept from Buddhist philosophy, and it has different formulations in different sects of Buddhism. And I had a more abstract and general understanding of interdependence, but after the course, I think one major realization is the fact that this general concept can actually be translated into so many different techniques that are bodily, that are affective, and so it's certainly more than just a conceptual understanding. I'm struggling to articulate the kind of realization, probably because it's really not that conceptual, it's really something that you then have this kind of bodily realization of the ways in which we are intimately connected with each other, even beyond thoughts.

00:19:35:24 - 00:20:45:23

Sam: Often in the classroom, we were out of our seats and moving around too, sometimes. There were these exercises that Frances had us doing to illustrate how our bodies and nervous systems are interdependent, so there were these movements we were doing where we were paired up and had to hold this thin wooden stick between our hands and sort of push and pull and balance and keep the stick in the air, and just very intuitively react to the other person's movements. This was a really interesting activity, which began to feel very intimate and relaxing. It felt like it was so easy to become attuned to what the other person was doing with their body and how to respond to that, and it was just a very peaceful thing. It was really, really interesting.

00:20:46:24 - 00:24:04:17

Sam: Having engaged with Buddhism before the course, I had encountered the philosophy of emptiness, you know, things lack intrinsic existence, that's all good and well... And I had thought about the way that my life is supported by a countless amount of factors and people. Also being a student of cognitive science, which is a very interdisciplinary program, I had often thought about the way that issues don't exist in isolation and always result from a number of causes and conditions... But I think the biggest lesson that I took from the course was the inter and intrapersonal implications of interdependence, how compassion and emptiness are really two sides of the same coin. Some of the lessons from the readings that really stuck with me were ideas like, that we all exist somewhere on spectrums of ignorance, that nobody willingly creates suffering for themselves, and when we really try to embody our understanding of interdependence and emptiness, it really forces you to think a bit more carefully before you make static attributions to somebody's character and disposition, and think more deeply about the situational influences to the people that they are. When we consider how our own being is continuous with that of many others and how the immediacy of the objects that make up our life have come from other people, and everything around us has come from other people, when we think about the way the world appears to us and think about the challenges and mysteries that we all kind of have to explore collectively, it seems like it only makes sense to relate to other people with compassion and understanding that we're all trying to figure things

out and we're all trying to find our way, and also to treat other people with that mentality, given the way that we couldn't exist without them and we very well could have ended up in a situation like them, they very well could have ended up in a situation like us. There are so many elements of our lives that are contingent on things that are out of our control... It just makes sense to act in such a way to create harmony, I think, and to solidify ourselves with each other so that we don't have to be in the world alone.

00:24:07:27 - 00:24:37:14

Aaron: So the final class was this sort of ritual, like final gathering, where we did this breathwork together, and it puts you in this sort of state of euphoria. For a U of T class, it's just totally different from anything I've been in, and involved in at U of T, obviously. This wasn't just studying with a group, you know, this wasn't like doing flashcards. This was like, we're breathing together and changing our state of consciousness.

00:24:38:12 - 00:25:35:14

Aaron: So I remember at first it was just difficult, but I could tell... Because we're all doing it, it was like this shared sort of struggle with like this new way of breathing, almost. But then as I got into it more and started feeling the changes in how I was feeling, kind of lightheaded, and you really surrender to just the activity of... The interconnected activity I guess, yeah. This setting where we're all doing the same practice, just surrendering to the present moment and just doing the practice together, and you're not really thinking of a self, speaking of interconnectedness, you're not thinking about how you're independent, like how you're feeling in your shell that's apart from everyone else in the class, you rid yourself of all your ideas of yourself and other people. You're just doing it as this collective.

00:25:36:05 - 00:26:14:21

Aaron: It was almost like it just opened myself up to something beyond myself, I guess, something like this shared activity. We discussed after everyone's individual experiences, when we're sort of gathering together, like gathering back into ideas of what happened, just sharing, like how everybody felt, everybody had different experiences. But it was like there was this collective bonding that has lasted, sort of. It was just an experience sort of like opened your mind to interconnectedness.

00:26:25:23 - 00:27:34:14

Sam: Because we were discussing our own ideas and sharing our own feelings so much, it really felt like we were all sharing in this experience together. I think it's particularly meaningful to be engaging in these practices of transformation together, whether we're doing it at home individually or doing an activity together in the class, to be able to come back to the group and disclose what has been happening to us along that journey and what we've been experiencing is really, really special. To hear other people's insights and their experiences is really inspiring and humbling. It gives me an idea of gratitude for what I've experienced, it gives me a sense of what I still have to learn, what I've yet to notice or experience that somebody else has, and I think that this had really fostered a sense of gratitude and respect and empathy for my classmates.

00:27:36:10 - 00:29:19:04

Sally: For as long as I can remember, I've always understood there was some interdependence of environmental things. I was raised in a cottage in Quebec that was called "Two Elms", and my grandmother called me aside when I was about seven or eight, telling me it used to be called "Four Elms". As time went on, a disease came, Dutch Elm, and it took away... And we actually only had one elm on the tree at that point but she was keeping it called "Two Elms" so that we would learn that things don't stay the same way. Which I thought was interesting, but how it tied to it, I think I just always knew that things changed, and they were changed by something outside. So I have promoted Neonics being a bad pesticide for years, and written many papers on that because I knew that that affects everything, pollinators, and what we do affects the pollinators that affects that... But I hadn't gone any further than that, I hadn't really looked at it. I don't think the course is really ended for me, I think I've become very curious. It's gone beyond just the social implication of the interconnectedness or the globalization, business aspect of it. It's entered into, well, for me, brand new it's entered into my body as far as how I can manage my body so that I can manage my day.

00:29:21:16 - 00:30:28:24

Sally: Well, it's hard to step away from the politics happening today. And I think going from just looking at a very superficial what I buy, my clothing, or my food has been created, harvested, packaged, shipped, and I'm paying five dollars for it and all that's covering everything, that I think I had a handle on but wasn't doing anything about. Now I'm finding everything is connected. I look at things and I'm going, what I do or what you might do is going to have an impact well beyond our view. So I do think how I might approach activism may change, I'm not sure if the reality will be any more utopian, but I think definitely what I might do will change.

00:30:30:18 - 00:32:31:12

Richard: Yeah, a realisation of the depth of the significance of the things that we were learning in that class, one thing is by being more mindful and being more aware of our own experience while realizing that your own experience is not bounded to your own skin or your own body, but it's really a manifestation of sentient experience in the greater web of cause and effect actually makes me feel a little less isolated in times of physical distancing, and being mostly home and not being able to physically connect with people, with friends and family in the usual way. It gives that interesting realisation that even though you're alone, you're really not, because your experience is not bounded to yourself, it's one that's shared by many out there. Your experience is really not kind of wrapped in itself. It's kind of like... You get this realisation that your experience is part of a larger whole, and in attending to your own experience mindfully, you are actually attending to what is a reflection of a greater part, a greater sort of arena of all experiences that other sentient beings also participate in, or other people who are physically distancing from you are also participating.

00:32:33:04 - 00:33:49:29

Aaron: This topic of interdependence, how we're all connected, we all share this grounding condition of just, I guess, being. You can definitely say the pandemic, just the raw facts of it, we

can all be infected by this virus. Even like thinking back to Sharma's work now, how on a cellular level there is this deep, collective self that's greater than our own egoic point of view that we need to care about, like even the policies of wearing masks and stuff now, these sort of social changes are speaking to how we have to open our circle of concern for this collective self that we're trying to protect, not just our individual selves that we think is independent from everyone else. This is a system we need to work together to sustain and hopefully help recover from this...

00:33:52:22 - 00:35:24:14

Richard: So I think this course really complements other courses well, in that it draws attention to a different set of skills, skills that are not just critical reading skill, not just writing skills, not just skills to be able to write programs or to carry out mathematical calculations. But they are skills about how you can say, for example, be open, even paying scientific attention to your own experience in a systematic and serious way. And that we learn very quickly is it's something that's not easy to do and it requires a lot of practice. But in typical courses, this kind of skill certainly is not cultivated. But in this class, it's one major goal of the class, that we would develop that kind of skill. So I think it's a different set of skills... And also even the skills of being able to open to our fellow students or other other people, it also requires a lot of social skills or compassion skills, that also is not a focus of many other classes... At least not the classes that I've taken.

00:35:27:20 - 00:35:50:00

Aaron: Yeah, it was refreshing, honesty. So usually at U of T it's just, you study, and there's either tests or you research and then you write an essay, so it was deep, and there was like this social bonding to like every class. It was a sort of community, or a sangha.

00:35:52:21 - 00:36:48:17

Xinran: To be honest, actually, I would wish all courses are like that. Because normally in university courses, I feel like our learning is directed outwards, so whatever material or content it is, we are looking outside for something, for a new kind of knowledge and we're trying to absorb and understand it. But for this course, I think a big part of it is actually to look inwards, to put yourself in the picture and engage yourself in your own thoughts. It really, I think, for me, actually, it was like transforming personally. So I wasn't just learning something, but I was learning also about myself, and my thoughts changed and evolved as I learned more about myself and about interdependence and the course content.

00:36:49:18 - 00:38:13:08

Sam: I think, it's largely due to the way Frances had set up the course and what she made the assignments, the way she had evaluated us, and the way that she encouraged this space of discussion and communication and equal co-participation. We all went through the ideas and exercises together, and it wasn't a one way flow of information. And I think using these embodied practices and activities that she did were ways to think about and process ideas in a way that isn't purely rationally, and I think that that goes a really long way, in the way that these experiences sit with us, I think. You know, we remember these movements, and we

remember being up and doing this or doing that, much more strongly than just one day of sitting in a classroom in front of a projector that just blurs into another day of doing the same thing and another day doing the same thing. Every day we came to class it was something exciting and new that we hadn't done before, and that was really, really fantastic.

00:38:28:01 - 00:39:13:03

Sarah: Sounds like quite a different class. In their own voices here, students told me how totally different from almost every other course this was for them. The learning experience designed so richly integrated their embodied and affective experiences with their readings, these frequent reflective writings, and these class experiences. It's clear that Frances built a course on a core Buddhist studies concept, interdependence, but built it into a class with lasting impact in the lives of her students. Through the practices done together in their class time, a class time that, by the way, was also often lengthened to four hours most weeks, the students harnessed their bodies and their breaths to heighten accompany and integrate intellectual experiences.

00:39:13:16 - 00:39:44:07

Sarah: All of the students commented about how personal this integration felt, making them think about themselves, their relationships to their worlds, their memories. They spoke of experiencing gratitude for their bodies and letting go of wounds. What also stands out to me was what Sam called equal co-participation, students with a professor going through these exercises and readings together, being in a community, a safe and supportive space, inviting and encouraging personal reflection and processing through this physical level.

00:39:44:29 - 00:40:20:06

Sarah: Sally said that this made the class not a "pretend study of something in the past", but instead very lived and applicable. Six months after the course wrapped, in a moment of global pandemic where everyone's lives had been changed radically overnight, all these students still describe this experience as transformative. Thank you to Xinran, Sam, Sally, Richard and Aaron, for speaking with me about your experience in this course. You can find more information about Frances' course on interdependence on our website, with the show notes, plus the transcript at teachingbuddhism.net.

00:40:20:25 - 00:40:42:11

Sarah: If you've enjoyed this, please hit that subscribe button and share this with your friends. Special thanks to Dr. Betsy Moss for recording, and creative direction for this episode, and to Dr. Frances Garrett for editing and co-producing this episode. This podcast was created at the Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation Center for Buddhist Studies at the University of Toronto. Thanks for listening and be well.