Episode 4: Abhishek Amar Negotiating the Layers Material History

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Speakers
Sarah Richardson
Abhishek Amar

00:00:00:02 - 00:00:19:26
Abhishek: You try to make a geographically distant place accessible to all these young people who may not even go to India or who have not been to India, right? So they get a different sense of place and space, and it sparks creativity.

00:00:19:28 - 00:00:31:07
Sarah: Welcome to this episode of The Circled Square, the podcast where we talk about teaching Buddhism in higher education. My name is Sarah Richardson, from the Ho Center for Buddhist Studies at the University of Toronto.

00:00:31:09 - 00:01:02:09
Sarah: In this episode we sat down with Abhishek Amar. Abhishek Is an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Hamilton College in upstate New York, and has been part of that faculty since 2010. Abhishek specializes in the archeological history of South Asian religions. We met with Abhishek remotely over zoom, and talked to him about his teaching. He teaches about religions with and through material culture and archaeology, so we're calling this episode Negotiating the Layers: Material History in Our Teaching.

00:01:02:11 - 00:01:43:17
Abhishek: My name is Abhishek Amar, I work on the archaeological history of Buddhism in South Asia. My PhD was on the site of Bodh Gaya but I have extended my work to other parts of India. Right now I am doing a couple of projects, one of which is an attempt to study history and Buddhism between 5th century and 12th century CE in India. I am based at Hamilton College in upstate New York where I teach courses on South Asia, so my teaching includes courses on all of South Asian religions, predominantly Buddhism, Hinduism, and a little bit of Islam because now we have somebody doing Islam here.

00:01:44:00 - 00:01:49:09
Sarah: And what is the landscape like at Hamilton College? Who are your students and what are their interests?

00:01:50:27 - 00:02:53:05
Abhishek: Well Hamilton College is a liberal arts college, and we have an open curriculum where we don't really enforce structure on students when they arrive. So for the first three semesters that they are here they can explore different disciplines before they go on to decide what they would like to major in. Even though I'm in the religious studies department my

courses are cross-listed with history and art history, so that tells you that we are trying to create dialogue across different curriculum. And yes, students go through these courses, they're interested in South Asian religions. Specifically my Indian Buddhism course that I've taught for the last nine years has been filled every year and there has always been a long waiting list. Yeah, a lot of interest in studying Buddhism. Which is why now that we have a person doing Islam I am going to offer another seminar course on Buddhism next semester, which is called Buddhism, Business, and State.

00:02:53:14 - 00:03:04:02
Sarah: Oh interesting. OK well I want to hear about both of these. So tell us first about your Indian Buddhism course. What is this course set up to teach students, and how do you do it?

00:03:04:07 - 00:03:57:19
Abhishek: So this course is an introduction to the history of Buddhism in South Asia. That's that's the main goal of the course, I want to introduce them to South Asia through a study of Buddhism. So when I go to the first class I see 18 to 20 year old students who have some familiarity with Buddhism because they have been told about Buddhism in the school curriculum in America, or wherever they're coming from. The first conversation we have is about what is Buddhism, what do they know about Buddhism?... And their perceptions are that Buddhism is a philosophy, Buddhism is a religion without ritual, they don't even use the word religion. To them it's cool, much more appealing, and very peaceful. Those are the perceptions that they bring to the class.

00:04:00:00 - 00:04:42:27
Abhishek: My goal then is to help them understand the diversity of Buddhism, or to question these stereotypes of Buddhism as presented in the West, or everywhere else, even in India I think for that matter. So in this course I try to introduce them to different methodologies that have been used for studying Buddhism that scholars continue to engage with, and to give them a sense of how Buddhism is also embedded in everyday life of South Asia historically. Often the study of Buddhism is linked to texts, and one of my goals is to explain the material side of Buddhism.

00:04:43:15 - 00:04:50:00
Sarah: Interesting. So when you say that you expose students to the materiality of Buddhism, how do you do that?

00:04:53:12 - 00:05:30:07
Abhishek: The first important thing is to figure out a textbook that works, that shows a lot of images so students can see the visuality. I have used Rupert Gethin in the past, but Gethin is a very dense textbook. It works, but it doesn't have images, it doesn't really convey the idea of Buddhism being embedded in material culture. So I've used Kevin Trainor for the last couple of years which has worked well because the ideas there are presented very succinctly, but there are a lot of images with information that students can think about.

00:05:30:19 - 00:05:55:14
Abhishek: I mean our goal in an introductory course is to make them think. So that's number one. Number two, the way I have structured the course... So the course is divided in four or five different sections. The first section is actually introduction, where we talk about the discipline and the approaches. So one of the articles that I make them read is Gregory Schopen, the one that he's written on protestant presuppositions.

00:05:55:16 - 00:05:59:08
Sarah: Right, "Archeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism."

00:06:00:02 - 00:06:18:22
Abhishek: Yes that's the article that I use. So with that article It's important to emphasize how Buddhism has evolved as a discipline and how it has been shaped by Protestant presuppositions that has dominated the study of religion, not just Buddhism but every other religion I would say across the world.

00:06:18:24 - 00:06:33:21
Sarah: Yeah. Can you summarize for our listeners who won't be familiar necessarily with Gregory Schopen's work? What is his key argument in that piece and others? What does he mean by "Protestant presuppositions", and how did they influence the early study of Indian Buddhism?

00:06:34:22 - 00:07:06:11
Abhishek: I think in that article what Schopen is trying to do is emphasize how archaeological sources, predominantly epigraphical sources, have been treated as a supplementary source which hasn't been given its own weight, right. He makes an argument that if you look at material culture independently and treat them as an independent source that can help you develop some interpretive framework, the story of Buddhism that we get is vastly different from the one that we get from mere reading of text.

00:07:07:06 - 00:07:16:20
Sarah: So it's not necessarily a story of a philosophical debate but rather that there was a huge amount of lay involvement very early from men and women, right?

00:07:18:04 - 00:07:54:06
Abhishek: Yeah not just that, but also how the making of Buddhism is not just about sangha, it's also about people, it's also about all the different actors. So the agency is not confined to sangha. Sangha is the dominant... I mean the texts that have come to us have come predominantly through a Buddhist tradition, like the monastic tradition. But when you look at material culture you begin to see other actors involved in the process, and that opens up the possibility of exploring Buddhism from other sides. The fact that there is the idea of relationship between Buddhism and trade, or Buddhism and irrigation, Buddhism and environment, right.

00:07:54:12 - 00:08:28:23

Abhishek: So those possibilities... Buddhists were not simply speculating about philosophy all the time, but were actively engaged in rituals or practices that helped them develop these long-term links with society. So those are the things that we need to emphasize in order to question the stereotypes with which they come to the first class, when they're talking about Buddhism as a philosophy, or they're thinking of Buddhism as an answer to the sufferings of the world, or Buddhism as being a very peaceful religion, because the story that you get from material culture is vastly different.

00:08:29:00 - 00:08:49:27
Abhishek: That, in a way, sets up the course for me. That's why I start the beginning with the study of this discipline, how Buddhism came to be developed as a discipline, and what are the methods that have been used. So that's what I ask students to think and reflect about in the first section of the course, and then we move on to the basics of the course where we talk about the Triple Gem, Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

00:08:53:13 - 00:09:27:28
Abhishek: But I don't stop there, I have also included a separate section on laity, because laity needs to be given agency in the making of Buddhism early on. So all of these three gems make sense only when when there is laity, when they're in dialogue with each other. So Triple Gem, that section includes laity. Once we have covered that, then we move on to the third section where we think about expansion and localization of Buddhism. And I do this section specifically to emphasize how there is no one way of thinking, no one method of studying Buddhism.

00:09:28:02 - 00:10:00:10
Abhishek: When you think about localization you begin to see different manifestations of Buddhism, which is evident also in material culture. So the stupa designs that you see in western India is vastly different from what you encounter in northern India, or eastern India where Buddhism originated. So with the expansion and localization we also begin to see how laity is involved, how royalty is involved in the process of expansion, and how all of these shape Buddhism by the beginning of image worship and things like that.

00:10:00:24 - 00:11:05:28
Abhishek: And then we move to the fourth section where we talk about new schools, competition and decline. I mean there is a challenge here because we are trying to cover too much, but it's an introductory course and I just want to give them a lay of the land. And then we come back in the fifth section to the revival of Buddhism through the 19th and 20th century, and how the study of Buddhism, the emergence of Buddhism as a discipline of study had shaped newer movements within Buddhism. In that, again, my focus is not predominantly on the twentieth century modernist movement, but also on how several Buddhist sites that were excavated and found discovered in the 19th and 20th century, have been renovated, have been reclaimed, and have become active places of worship amongst the Buddhist community, how Buddhist communities continue to engage with them. We end up almost going to the UNESCO things, UNESCO tagging of some of these sites, which we talk briefly about.

00:11:06:00 - 00:11:06:15
Sarah: Sites like Bodh Gaya? And Nalanda?

00:11:10:22 - 00:11:28:07
Abhishek: Bodh Gaya, and more recently Nalanda, and I was involved in the preparation of dossier for Nalanda. That's where I have inside information how these things happen. So I reflect on that experience, as well as how I've read the whole dossier for Bodh Gaya and other things.

00:11:29:05 - 00:12:01:28
Sarah: Yes, Interesting. Can you give us a sort of sample from either your work on Bodh Gaya or your knowledge of Nalanda? What does a closer attention to the history of those sites in the 19th and 20th centuries show us? Because I know that you've done some really interesting and careful work on the history of the reconstruction, and the way that these sites have been kind of "modernly monumentalized"... And these are, in some ways, fictions that we're still propagating and participating in.

00:12:02:26 - 00:13:36:15
Abhishek: There are a number of things that we can talk about, but let me give you one example. So Bodh Gaya is a classic example of how it has become a site which is imagined as a Buddhist center of the world in the 19th and 20th century, and all of that is predicated on the developments that happened in the 19th century. So the discovery of the site or the early reconstruction in the 1880's led to multiple claims on the site. I don't want to go into historical details here, but the one point that I want to emphasize is that with the modernist movements that were beginning to emerge in the late 19th century, we see the site reconstructed and immediately after that we see Mahabodhi society of India emerging on the scene, or Japanese Buddhists emerging on the scene trying to make a claim on the site which led to a prolonged court case, which was eventually decided after India achieved its independence in 1950s. So independence in 1947 but the settlement of the Bodhgaya case in 1950s, I think it's 54 or 55, I don't remember that exact year. When you look at the site itself, the reconstruction model itself, you will see that it was not based on what was recovered archaeologically, it was based on a textual reconstruction of the site. So the scholars working in the 19th century, like Cunningham and others, relied extensively on Chinese pilgrim accounts to reconstruct the site.

00:13:36:17 - 00:13:49:27
Abhishek: Now, when you go to Bodh Gaya today what you see is how this archaeologist Alexander Cunningham in the 19th century read this Chinese travel account. It's not what was there on the ground, right.

00:13:49:29 - 00:13:52:05
Sarah: So he's looking back at Xuanzang...

00:13:55:00 - 00:13:55:15
Abhishek: And Faxian.

00:13:56:14 - 00:14:03:06
Sarah: And Faxian... And determining on the basis of their descriptions of Bodh Gaya, what should be reconstructed?

00:14:03:22 - 00:14:41:27
Abhishek: Yeah. If you look at his papers you realize that he is making a literal map of the textual account. So he's digging and if a sculpture comes out, then he said "oh three steps from here you will find an image, and three steps from here you will find a stupa and that's where Buddha accepted food from Indra". So for him, that's the sign marking Buddha and Indra's dialogue there. He imagined it in that manner. So in the process, we have lost archaeological context and we we don't really know what exactly was there and how to make sense of the material.

00:14:42:24 - 00:14:49:24
Sarah: Right. So he's not considering the site of the 12th century or the 13th century as the temple would have still been in use by then?

00:14:50:28 - 00:15:46:17
Abhishek: Or it continued to be used to the 15th century. I think we have evidence of the temple being used in the 15th century. So what we have is a 7th century replica of a site that lasted for such a long period, almost one and half millennia. So what we experience today is that seventh century reconstruction. Now that has become the model for everybody. So when you go to the site that's what you experience, when you look at the UNESCO report, and the dossier that was prepared to consider Bodh Gaya's status as a World Heritage Site. You see that report being replicated, they're not talking about other things. In a way it's also led to like decontextualizing some of the site. So Bodh Gaya for everybody is that temple complex. Just behind the temple complex there's a huge mound, and three remains of stupas...Three remains of monasteries have been found.

00:15:47:12 - 00:16:53:06
Abhishek: But nobody goes to the sites, these sites have not even been conserved. So the relationship between the temple and its surroundings is not even evident to people. Nobody goes there. I mean there are hundreds of tourists who go to Bodh Gaya today. This decontextualization is a method of archaeology that continues to shape the way that Buddhist sites or religious sites are studied even today, unfortunately. So I think an important part of my work and something that I also try to convey in my courses is how to relate context, and you can do that also by looking at the broader landscape and how a particular site relates to its landscape. I can give you another example, of how the study of early medieval Buddhism has often emphasized links between Buddhist monastic institutions and royalty and the fact that the Buddhist sangha was dependent extensively upon the royal patronage. And that has gone on for far too long. It's because we don't really go out in the landscape and do a landscape survey.

00:16:53:21 - 00:17:20:01
Abhishek: I mean just in the Gaya district, based on 20 years of survey that I've conducted, I found more than 350 Buddhist sites with Buddhist material remains from the early Medieval period. So this idea that sangha is an isolated institution with no social links whatsoever, which was dependent upon a royal patronage and had become so lazy that they were not even getting out is a false notion.

00:17:20:06 - 00:17:25:04
Sarah: And what type of remains are you finding in these village sites that you're locating?

00:17:25:08 - 00:18:15:29
Abhishek: The majority of them have sculptures. Some of them have stupa remains as well, I would say, and a number of funerary votive stupas, but majorly sculptural remains, which tells you that the sangha was out there. There is a link between sculpture production that is going on at the monastic sites, but some of these sculptures were also at all of these villages. So I call them "settlement-shrines" in my work, that these are settlement-shrines where people were coming on a daily basis, engaging with Buddhism, which in a way created concrete links between them and Buddhism. So this idea that there is no lay patronage in the early medieval period is false. To me it's totally false because people have not really gone out in the landscape and and tried to look at this connection.

00:18:16:01 - 00:18:32:25
Sarah: You've also started to do some really interesting work in digital humanities, and your Sacred Centers of India project is a website that already has a whole bunch of sites from Gaya on it. Can you tell us a bit about that project and how it's going to develop in the future?

00:18:34:00 - 00:19:17:27
Abhishek: So the Sacred Centres of India project started with the aim of organizing all the archaeological data that I had collected over the last 15-20 years. It started in 2013. So my goal was to develop a structure in which I can put all the data and begin to see patterns, that was the initial goal. So I thought, OK let me start with Gaya, because Bodh Gaya has been studied a lot and there's a lot of materials from Bodh Gaya in different museums so maybe I can think about Bodh Gaya a little later, but let me just look at Gaya first because, I mean Gaya is historically as complex as Bodh Gaya I would say, but in terms of material remains there is a lot on the ground that you can still see and work with.

00:19:17:29 - 00:19:21:27
Sarah: Yeah. What is the physical relationship between Gaya and Bodh Gaya?

00:19:21:29 - 00:19:53:06
Abhishek: So Gaya and Bodh Gaya are 10 kilometers apart, and we often don't acknowledge the relationship between the two because one is Gaya, is a Hindu pilgrimage centre and one for its funerary rituals, and Bodh Gaya has been the paradigmatic centre of the Buddhist world because of the story of enlightenment. But we often overlook the relationship between the

two. The fact that Buddhism has also been linked to funerary rituals, and you see that link in Bodh Gaya also because when Cunningham excavated the site he found hundreds of votive stupas.

00:19:54:12 - 00:20:48:15
Abhishek: So that funerary remains and its link to Bodh Gaya is not something that scholars have expounded upon or looked carefully upon. That's one thing that is still missing from this scholarship. So I started with Gaya and my initial concern was to look for all the Buddhist remains that are still being worshipped in the Hindu temples of Gaya, and then I started surveying and I collected all the material... So with the Sacred Center the goal was to organize the material and present it in a way so that these material remains became accessible, but also there is a documentation for people to look back on. A lot of these Hindu temples are inaccessible to non-Hindus, number one, and number two, there is a huge problem of smuggling in the area. A number of sculptures from Gaya/Bodh Gaya region have been stolen, and I came across stories from almost every village or almost every shrine in Gaya where there are stories of stealing and smuggling.

00:20:48:27 - 00:20:56:00
Sarah: Sure. This is still a very unstable, and poorer area of India that this is in, right? Bihar state?

00:20:56:02 - 00:22:37:22
Abhishek: Yeah. I mean the other side of it is that there is so much that people don't really think of doing something with it. There is so much that if one gets stolen nobody is... I mean it gets reported in the local media but there is no concerted attempt to educate the people about their own heritage. I think nowadays there is more awareness because when I go to field sites I talk to people, but there are also other bodies in the state that are trying to educate people about their own heritage. I think people care about these cultures, but they can't do anything about it. I mean they can go to the police, report it, but I don't think stealing of sculptures is a priority for the police given the pressures that they work with. So my goal was to at least get a database and so far I've done 20 temples. There is a database available on the website, and in the process I also ended up doing a virtual and 3D model of Vishnupada temple which is the main temple, the most important funerary shrine in Gaya itself, and it has one or two Buddhist sculptures as well, I would say. It has been a useful experience because we did the modeling twice. One was based on the drawings that I did, and the other was based on laser technology. So I could see the difference in technology, and how you can try to recreate something with drawings and pictures and there are limitations to it, whereas with the technological platform you can do a laser scan which will get you everything accurate. It's quite fantastic.

00:22:38:26 - 00:22:43:06
Sarah: So the laser scan you used like a GIS technology or something?

00:22:43:14 - 00:23:09:24

Abhishek: Yes it's like GIS but it's a laser scanner, so you take it to a shrine and then basically it moves 360 degrees and captures everything, not just the structure and the details, but also sculptures, and then you can model the sculptures as well. So based on these two models I have tried to write a couple of articles but at the same time use them for my classes.

00:23:09:26 - 00:23:16:15
Sarah: How do you use it in class? How do you share that with students and what do you have them do with it? First of all, how do you show them the VR model?

00:23:17:09 - 00:24:10:17
Abhishek: So VR comes in... I mean there has to be an academic context, the academic context is that I make them read a lot of stuff on Gaya and Bodh Gaya first, we spend two weeks doing that. So first they have to read a couple of accounts from the 19th century and couple of accounts from the 20th century, and then I take them to the lab, because one way of experiencing the site is by reading descriptions, and that's what they have read - OK, 19th century this is how the site looked, 20th century this is how the site looked. Now with the VR they're experiencing how it looks in reality, virtual reality. So they're experiencing the site. And when I was doing the laser scans I could also capture the moments of ritual. So there is a priest sitting next to the shrine, there are people coming in, pilgrims walking out, they are doing their puja... All of those things are captured. So they they experience that.

00:24:11:21 - 00:25:16:11
Abhishek: In a way you try to make a geographically distant place accessible to all these young people who may not even go to India, or who have not been to India, right. So they get a different sense of place and space, and it sparks creativity, and they want to do different types of projects. Well one of the things that comes out of this experience is an assignment, and for that I have created a number of options. So one of which is that they can do something creative, two, they can form a group and reenact the ritual by making a copy or a replica of the shrine and enact the ritual, or third, the ones who don't want to go into any of these creative sites have will have to write a blog where they are thinking about the ritual and the space by engaging with the images from the database, so they can choose images from the database and work with them, two or three, to write a blog post of two thousand words.

00:25:16:18 - 00:25:48:11
Abhishek: So in a way this spurs creativity, this gives them an experience of where the world is technologically, and how they can not think of religious studies or the history of material culture in a very limited manner, but how this could lead to all sorts of different things. Students have done a lot of creative things, a lot of creative projects from making a game, to writing a story book, to paintings and I think the most interesting one, most recent one, was a student created a game.

00:25:50:01 - 00:25:53:10
Sarah: Ah, what was the goal of the game? Or how did it work?

00:25:54:09 - 00:27:03:17
Abhishek: Well I think it was like a board game where they were trying to make you understanding the geographical landscape and interrelationship between the shrines, and how if you visit this shrine you get a karma point, and things like that. So there is the game side of it which could be imagined as a virtual game if you want to, but the other side of this is that they have to understand the landscape and the temples and the shrines and how visitors when they come they are not confined to one shrine, but they go to three or five different shrines to perform the rituals. So the interrelationship between those shrines becomes more evident in the game. So I think the goal is not simply to make it fun, but also to educate them about the context, the landscape, the spatiality and interrelationships between them. My goal is now to work with this format for the Bodh Gaya site. The challenge there is that a lot of material from Bodh Gaya was taken away in the 19th and 20th centuries to different museums of the world.

00:27:03:21 - 00:27:06:26
Sarah: So a lot of it is probably in the British Museum?

00:27:07:29 - 00:27:20:10
Abhishek: British Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum, Berlin, so I think it's everywhere. You can find one or two pieces of Bodh Gaya in virtually every museum in the world.

00:27:20:13 - 00:27:24:21
Sarah: Sure. But then a digital project that brought those pieces back together would be really fruitful.

00:27:25:27 - 00:28:22:28
Abhishek: Yes, it'll be a huge resource for a number of scholars or young people who want to explore a study of material culture, or are interested in studying Buddhism. I mean even now if you look at other Buddhist sites you will realise that there is a lot of work on Bodh Gaya, but comparatively there is not much work on other important Buddhist sites, Lumbini, Sartnath... very few works. I mean you have a lot of art historians writing about the material from Sarnath but there is no archaeological study of the site apart from the excavation report itself, which you can not consider a study, and then you have very few works in question. Recently my students in Indian Buddhism were doing their projects on these Buddhist sites, which is part of the last assignment in this course, Indian Buddhism course, and they start by developing a bibliography.

00:28:23:00 - 00:28:42:21
Abhishek: And then when they started looking for material they couldn't find much on Kushinagar and Lumbini, there are very few pieces that have been written on these sites which tells you that, yes we know a lot about Buddhism now than we did in the past, but even now many of these important sites do not have sophisticated scholarship yet.

00:28:42:23 - 00:28:51:17

Sarah: Sure there's a lot of evidence then that hasn't really been considered. We're still building a house of cards based on... Not a full deck of cards.

00:28:52:12 - 00:29:07:27
Abhishek: That's true. I'm happy that at least there is more work on Bodh Gaya, at least one site has attracted a lot of attention. But then, that's also tied to the World Heritage status, that's also tied to...

00:29:08:15 - 00:29:10:26
Sarah: Flows of global capital I'm sure.

00:29:11:02 - 00:29:23:01
Abhishek: Yeah exactly. The modern means that we often see operating and shaping the future of these sites. But that's that's not the case with several other sites.

00:29:23:03 - 00:29:51:29
Sarah: When you expose students, and I guess also the wider public, through this website to these originally Buddhist sculptures that are now in Hindu contexts, has there been any fear or concern from the Hindu temples themselves? That this would spur a kind of interreligious conflict? And also, what are you hoping to emphasize to students about the kind of dynamics of different religious contacts across time in this transition?

00:29:52:10 - 00:30:15:15
Abhishek: It's not just for Gaya, but even while surveying the landscape in all of that region, I would say I've encountered a number of villages where Buddhist sculptures are being worshipped as gods and goddesses. I can give you five examples off the top of my head where I've seen Buddhist male sculptures being worshipped as Hindu goddesses.

00:30:15:17 - 00:30:20:17
Sarah: So like a stone Bodhisattva or something? I'm imagining like a small pala stone...

00:30:22:04 - 00:30:58:20
Abhishek: Well they're big also, I mean there are like 6 feet tall sculptures that I could identify based on the size of these sculptures that these are Buddhist sculptures, because I was working with the permission of the state I was able to open cloth and see some of these sculptures. That's how I was able to decide this is a Buddhist sculpture being worshiped as a Hindu sculpture. I mean as an archaeologist, when I went for the first time to these places I myself did not feel comfortable, because I guess my focus at that time was too narrow.

00:30:58:22 - 00:32:32:14
Abhishek: But now after ten years, I see how these sculptures have not had one life, but multiple lives. And the context itself has changed over a period of time. So with new context comes new story, new tradition, I mean tradition itself is not a static thing. We may see sculptures... We can pin it down to a particular context, spatial, temporal context, but when

you look at what's going on now, you can also see how they have shaped the local geographies over a period of time. I can give you one particular example where you have big sculpture, a male Bodhisattva being worshipped as a Hindu goddess, and there's a whole tradition of how this place has emerged as a mini-sacred center in that area. It's a place of popular affair and has been like that for at least 200 years, because we can get a couple of accounts from the early 19th century, like Hamilton-Buchanan who visited the place, or Alexander Cunningham or researched the place in the late 19th century. So these sculptures have had multiple lives and the contexts have changed. With the changing context comes new story, new meaning. You cannot think of material culture, these materials as stagnant, but adding and changing and transforming meaning to the place. Like place making. So you can think about different themes if you start looking at the context and the material, and the dialogue between the two, how those dialogues have gone on for centuries...

00:32:32:26 - 00:32:33:13
Sarah: And continue...

00:32:33:15 - 00:33:29:09
Abhishek: Yeah. If you look at them carefully you can also unlayer the layers that we encounter at these sites. So my initial goal was just to document the material, think about it from Buddhist perspectives, but now I also think about how they make sense today, how they are being used today, how people incorporate with that. That place is really interesting because we have a story that this sculpture, which is a Buddhist, is actually that of a lady, who was a pious lady and the local king apparently had a bad eye on her, he tried to molest her. And so she invoked her deity, and the deity turned her and the king into stone. So I wanted to see who this king is and if there is a sculpture of the King. Then I went looking for that, and then that turned out to be a six foot sculpture of Buddha.

00:33:29:20 - 00:33:34:12
Sarah: Wow. So you went and asked, "where's the king?".

00:33:34:21 - 00:33:50:18
Abhishek: Yeah, so the king is Buddha and this figure is also a Bodhisattva. So you can see how these materials have been reinterpreted, and make sense in different ways to people. And both of those shrines are in the village.

00:33:50:21 - 00:34:26:11
Sarah: Yeah interesting. So how do you help your students to understand and negotiate these complex layers? Because what you're talking about then is not a simplistic history, but one with many many facets and reinterpretations. So you're asking them to not rely on the idea that one historical point of origin provides the full meaning and context for any piece, but rather that all these layers contribute to an ongoing process of meaning making. So how do you help them move past kind of black and white thinking? Which is, I'm sure, their first recourse.

00:34:26:13 - 00:34:54:21

Abhishek: Yeah I think they come with the black and white, the idea that they will get this clear black and white differentiation, and my goal is to introduce the nuances and tell them to think about meaning making and how it's not a one time exercise, it's a continuous process. So they know that the words that I use very often in the classroom are "complex" and "complicated", right, and that begins to shape their thinking as well.

00:34:55:07 - 00:36:33:07
Abhishek: So when we talk about material, talk about a particular image, and think about the meaning in the second century or third century of the common era, and then how that image, for instance, how Buddha has been represented in Ghandara, or in the 5th century Sarnath, or 9th century Nalanda. They can see that there is no one way of thinking about Buddha. There are multiple ways in which we can think about Buddha, and then if you compare that with the text itself, textual stories, and the fact that there is no archaeological evidence to prove that there was somebody called Buddha... So I think that asking these questions is really important. And then I opened the class for class discussion. One of the strategies that we emphasize in liberal arts curriculum is helping them learn to communicate their ideas as succinctly as possible in a classroom setting. So I am open for classroom discussion and I tell them that I will not call you out, I respect whatever you are saying, as long as you have done the readings, right, and it's based on your thinking and your understanding of the material. So the classroom is a space where they can freely express their ideas based on their reading, their interpretations, and I think when you have students talking in the class, you begin to see that there is no one way to think about it. There are multiple ways. So they are not just learning from me but also learning from their peers who have read the material who are looking at these images and trying to interpret them.

00:36:33:09 - 00:36:45:08
Abhishek: So it's a two way process, I think. It's not just me imparting the knowledge, and it's possible at a place like Hamilton because the classrooms sizes... we have 15-20 students, something like that.

00:36:47:28 - 00:36:58:23
Sarah: You might have something like 15, OK. So do you... I mean this is something that we all struggle with, but do your students come having done all the readings?

00:36:59:27 - 00:37:41:01
Abhishek: Yes. I think a key goal there is to, one, give readings that they can work with. So I told you I used Gethin and I realized that they were not reading all of it because it was very dense, Whereas if you look at Trainor, Trainor is written in a much more accessible manner, the pieces are short. So I give them Trainor, but at the same time I also assign another reading which could be a secondary piece, or it could be a primary source, an inscription or fragment from text... I've used John Strong's Experience of Buddhism, and different stories which are short with a little bit of commentary.

00:37:41:03 - 00:37:41:18

Sarah: So you find short things for them?

00:37:43:03 - 00:39:10:28
Abhishek: Yeah I feel that accessible and short is really important. Because I feel that their attention level, I mean the attention span that we have now for these students is really short. So you have to keep them engaged, and I think giving them readings that they can work with is better than... I mean if I assign them all articles by Schopen, I don't think they could read it. Yeah but if I give them Kevin Trainor along with the Experience of Buddhism piece, where there is a commentary... I mean you have to give something to hold on to that they can work with. So the commentary in Strong's book really helps them think about the ideas, and then they read the piece. I think we want to spend enough time in the classroom talking about these readings, the context, and setting it up so that we can have a dialogue. An informed dialogue. It is always a challenge to balance between discussion and lecture. So you have to give the context, and then let the discussion flow, and it gets there. Some days you are not very happy, you may not be satisfied, but most days it's fine. I mean the day you have to teach emptiness, that's a day you dread right, because you can't really take a sculpture and explain emptiness. So there are challenges as well when you are teaching an introductory course but it's also fun if they are engaged and they're talking, and every time our students do talk.

00:39:11:06 - 00:39:28:04
Sarah: And so you've alluded to the concept of emptiness being particularly hard to teach succinctly through your material culture lens, but are there any concepts that you've found particularly fruitful to explain in class with material? Any creative ways that you've done that?

00:39:28:06 - 00:40:12:01
Abhishek: Well the fact that they get to write their final research paper by looking at a theme that we have experienced, that we have discussed in the class, and they relate that to a particular site. So the research that they do, develop an annotated bibliography, then to do a presentation on the site, and then they write their assignment where they have to engage with images. So their final papers includes a couple of images that they're interpreting in relation to a particular site. So I think those are ways in which we can reinforce the idea of the embedded nature of Buddhism and materiality, and they get it.

00:40:12:03 - 00:40:57:07
Abhishek: So I think the assignments in this course are structured in that manner. The first assignment is a reflection on methodology, so they're writing about text, material culture, and which one is more useful, and I don't say that you have to argue that material culture is more useful, there are other ideas which you can bring together. So they're reading not just critique of scholars working on material culture about texts, but they're also reading the other set of material. The second one is about the Triple Gem and laity, where they write a short reflection piece on sangha or laity. The third one, expansion, localization, where they have explored a theme, and that's where inscriptions and other materials come to fore. And then the final assignment where they have to engage with material culture because they have to think of a

site. I mean everything that they've done has to be done in the context of a site, they have to correlate that.

00:40:58:13 - 00:41:36:07
Abhishek: So I think by the end of it, the last conversation that I had, last week, was this particular aspect. What did you learn from the class? And I asked them to think about your answers on day one. So the first day they thought of Buddhism as a philosophy devoid of any rituals, or it's only about suffering, and then at the end they're thinking about the sites and thinking about material culture, they're thinking about ways in which images are so powerful and play such an important role in shaping Buddhism. So even if they take that away from the class, I am happy and satisfied.

00:41:37:00 - 00:41:46:12
Sarah: And can you tell us a little bit about the course that you're developing to start next term, called "Business, Buddhism, and the State"? Is that it? Business, Buddhism, and the State? What are you planning there?

00:41:46:14 - 00:42:40:19
Abhishek: Well this is something that comes out of my own interest. So a number of scholars have worked on Buddhism and trade, a number of scholars have worked on Buddhism and irrigation, somehow we still have not emphasized... I mean my own understanding is that now I am beginning to work more on how Buddhism was rooted in society, how it had all of these links that helped Buddhism sustain itself for a longer period of time, specifically in the early medeival period when you have lots of material culture. So my goal is to somehow create a more sustained dialogue on the early Medeival period where we have a lot of inscriptions, a lot of materials to think about links between Buddhism, business, and state.

00:42:41:26 - 00:43:17:06
Abhishek: Again, this is a course... I haven't written the syllabus yet, I am still writing and hopefully I can tell you more in the future, but my goal is to explain the links, and this will build up on my intro course where I try to do a whole survey, versus having a thematic focus. Maybe expansion, localization, relations with the sangha, relations with royalty, relationships with a mercantile community... Those are the things that I would like to focus upon, but rather than doing the whole survey I'm going to focus these on specific sites.

00:43:17:09 - 00:44:04:15
Abhishek: So maybe I'll divide the course into three sections, one section will explain the basics of Buddhism, and the other two will emphasize the link between Buddhism and business, Buddhism and state, and while doing that we will focus on specific sites. So that way we get to study a site from a very detailed perspective, like Nalanda. Nalanda has been worked upon a lot, but there is a lot of material that has not even been touched. So my goal is that when we are looking at Buddhism and business, we can look at Nalanda and think about its relationship with landscape, its relationship to local political bodies, its control over the land and how it managed all the resources that it had, all the land grants that it had.

00:44:04:18 - 00:44:27:09
Abhishek: So maybe looking carefully at inscriptions, looking more carefully at the scenes, looking more carefully at all the material remains. Because we when we say Nalanda we say, "oh this is a medieval university, early medieval university" or something, we don't really think of Nalanda as something that was there in the 7th century, which was different from the 9th century, which was different from the 10th or 11th. So I want to unlayer these different layers.

00:44:27:11 - 00:44:36:01
Sarah: How it was developing... Interesting, yeah. And I assume also when you're sharing these sites with your students, you're able to do it through a lot of your own photographs as well, right?

00:44:36:11 - 00:44:51:26
Abhishek: Yeah yeah, I'm using lots of my own photographs of the sites. I mean obviously I work on the materiality of Buddhism and that's what I'm hoping again to emphasize throughout this course.

00:44:51:28 - 00:45:00:20
Sarah: Yeah it's wonderful too that you are then really able to continuously develop your own research also in tandem with your teaching, right?

00:45:01:09 - 00:45:48:19
Abhishek: That's the other goal. I have taught courses... So Death and Dying was related to a project on Gaya, Bodh Gaya, and it kind of intersected. So in a way my research and teaching, how they come together, that Death and Dying course is a good example and I've done that for years. It's an established course, it attracts very good enrolments, it's a seminar course, seminar courses are capped at twelve so it's a small group but there's a lot of discussion in the class. Similarly, this is going to be a small group of 12 students, and some of them have taken Indian Buddhism so they're familiar with the basics of Buddhism, and now we'll dive deeper into these links between Buddhism, business, and state, which will lead to good discussion.

00:45:49:19 - 00:46:12:20
Sarah: Yeah. Now I wanted to ask you about... We've all been shaped through the years of our being and thinking and writing and researching, so can you tell us about your own history and formation in a nutshell? How did you come to study this topic? How did you get interested and then how did you pursue the training in it?

00:46:13:23 - 00:47:04:05
Abhishek: Well my own background is I am from the state of Bihar, which is the land of Buddhism. I mean the name Bihar comes from vihara, as you know, number one I come from the place Vaishali. So when I was doing my Masters, one of the seminars that I did was on archaeology of Buddhism and that was on the site of Vaishali . So that was my initial interest in Buddhism. Having some good teachers at JNU was really crucial in shaping my interest in

studying Buddhism. So that was step one, and then step two, I ended up going for my M.Phil at JNU. And for my M.Phil I decided to work on the eight sites linked to the life events, and then I realized even though I wrote my M.Phil on that, I realized how limited that was because there is so much material and not much work.

00:47:05:17 - 00:48:21:20
Abhishek: So when I decided to do my PhD I decided to focus exclusively on the site of Bodh Gaya. Because Bodh Gaya has a lot of scholarship, but most of the scholarship is focused exclusively on the art historical material, looking specifically at the site, the Mahabodhi site. Scholars have talked about other monastic sites in the region and have looked at the sculptures, but they haven't done a study of archaeological context which is what I was more interested in. So as I understood the lay of the land in the scholarship and physical landscape, I realized that my strength would be to study Buddhism by looking at the broader social, political, and economic context in which Buddhism emerged, and how these institutions related to this context in order to sustain themselves at a site like Bodh Gaya. So the story of Bodh Gaya is not confined to the 19th century excavated context, but to a much larger landscape, and that's what I was trying to explore. So I would say in my experience in general while doing my M.Phil and the fact that I come from the state of Bihar where wherever you go you see Buddhist sights...

00:48:25:07 - 00:48:28:18
Sarah: And you were born at one of the sites of the miracles, right? Vaishali is a site of a famous miracle?

00:48:29:24 - 00:48:38:29
Abhishek: Yeah so there is there is that link too. So yeah, those are the things that have shaped my scholarship and how I came to study Buddhism.

00:48:39:24 - 00:48:46:13
Sarah: And for listeners who may not know, JNU is Jawaharlal Nehru University, in Delhi, the best university in India.

00:48:46:15 - 00:49:08:17
Abhishek: Well, thank you. Yes it is one of the good institutions, and it is known for its department of History, the Department for Historical Studies, where you get very rigorous training for your masters program. So that definitely played an important role and shaped my academic goals.

00:49:08:19 - 00:50:11:09
Sarah: The story of the decline of Buddhism in India is one that I would love to hear your thoughts and feelings about, how a more nuanced and complicated picture of that can emerge from better study. Because for those who maybe haven't been exposed to it as much, there is a longstanding kind of historical myth that Buddhism ended in the 12th century, abruptly and completely, and that was a result of the "incursion", how it's described in some texts, of Islam

to the subcontinent, or the growth of... And of course that's a dangerous kind of narrative to continue propagating, especially in moments like ours where we're still seeing a lot of continued racialization and racism against particular religious groups, and specifically islamophobia. So what do you think a better study of that period of decline could show?

00:50:12:25 - 00:50:45:15
Abhishek: I think this is, again, rooted in historiography as you pointed out. Islamophobia being one, the way scholars have studied Islamic sources literally, without carefully evaluating these sources is another, and then it's also linked to the way the history of Buddhism has been conducted, where we have tried to fit in Buddhism in the early historic and early medieval period. So India is about... I mean it's coming out of the British frame of Indian history where we have Hindu history, the Islamic history, and then the modern history, right.

00:50:45:22 - 00:51:49:27
Abhishek: And Hindu history is until the 13th century until the Islamic forces appear in the subcontinent, in northern and central India, unlike other parts, I mean Islam arrives in India quite early on I would say. But for scholars studying Buddhism, this is a frame in which even when they're excavating they're looking at the sites as in decline in the 13th century. They don't really look at the 13th century carefully, so that's what we need to do. We need to get out of these structures of scholarship and re-evaluate the material that is there. So I have published one article on that where I have looked at how scholars studying Islamic sources have continued to emphasize the literal reading, whereas scholars studying Buddhism have drawn on the nationalist writing in the 19th and the 20th century to make that argument that Hinduism was so dominant that it began to marginalize Buddhism, and then Islam came in and that destroyed the remaining....

00:51:49:29 - 00:52:32:21
Abhishek: So those are the two main streams of argument. If you look at sites like Nalanda, for instance, we don't even know what Nalanda looked like in the 10th and 11th century. We have no understanding of the layout in the 10th and 11th century, what we have is one monolithic understanding of early medieval Nalanda which is from the Gupta period to the 12th century, and then in the 13th century Islam comes in and it destroys Nalanda. I mean if you look at the account that is there in the Islamic text, you realize that it's not even a firsthand account, it's written at a particular point of time, 60 years, up to 1260, I think. It's a hearsay account on which the scholar writing the account, Minhaj, creates his argument on.

00:52:33:05 - 00:53:39:22
Abhishek: So we need to move away from that and look at the material culture, evaluate the material culture carefully, and then if you look at, say, a Tibetan text, Dharmasvarmin is there in Bodh Gaya and he's in Nalanda. He lives at both the places, he is there in Bodh Gaya and he talks about the fear of Muslim attacks, but they don't really destroy anything, there is no account. And he's there between 1234-1236, then he spends two years at Nalanda. And there are these monasteries in Nalanda where people continue to come. Similarly at Bodh Gaya we have people from Myanmar and other Buddhist places coming, and those accounts are there.

The problem is that scholars have said in the early medieval period there is no lay Buddhism, so the presence of laity is simply unrecognized, people don't even look for laity in and around the context. I mean if there is such a huge institution like Bodh Gaya or Nalanda for such a long period of time, they would know how to negotiate with political instability, because you cannot expect them not to know about political instability and survive for seven or eight hundred or thousand years.

00:53:39:29 - 00:54:29:25
Abhishek: So these are the questions that we need to think about, and we often correlate that with "oh Pala's are Buddhists and that's why". But if you look at inscriptions of Pala's, Pala is this major dynasty in eastern India between the 8th and the 12th century, and you realize that majority of the inscriptions from Pala's are not to Buddhist institutions but Hindu institutions. So then we need to look for the local political networks and how sangha relates with them. And the moment you start looking at local political institutions and sangha, a very different picture emerges where Buddhist institutions are constantly in dialogue with these local institutions who continue to make land grants, who continue to work with the sangha, and sangha, at the end of the day, has some prestige because it has been there for such a long time as a continuing institution.

00:54:29:27 - 00:55:07:16
Abhishek: So what happened to these continuing institutions is something that people don't really think about. They often go by the overarching pre-existing historical narratives, which shapes the scholarship, and I think that's what we need to dismantle, and that can only come if we do micro-history and do history from below, where you to begin to look at the material culture on the ground and build up your theory on the basis of what you see on the ground, emerging from the ground, rather than the top-down which has shaped the scholarship. And then we also need somebody to know Islamic sources and Buddhist sources, to see that dialogue...

00:55:07:18 - 00:55:11:14
Sarah: To bring them together, not look at them separately.

00:55:11:16 - 00:55:37:25
Abhishek: Exactly. I mean that's, again, the discipline and how these disciplinary formulations or formations have shaped scholarship. So even people like Richard Eaton, when they write about Islam and the destruction Hindu institutions, they can look at Islamic sources but they don't really work with the Buddhist sources. And if they work, a very different picture will emerge, I think.

00:55:37:28 - 00:55:45:17
Sarah: Yeah of course. Do you have any plans to take your students to India? Or have you ever done that? Taken undergraduate students to India?

00:55:46:02 - 00:56:17:21

Abhishek: So we did have previously a semester study abroad program of our own, which was a collaborative framework with a couple of other liberal arts schools in the area. But right now we are thinking of about a two to three week program, maybe to different regions of South Asia, and this is something that we are still debating and discussing and it may evolve, and if it evolves then I would love to take them to a place like Bodh Gaya, or even Bombay.

00:56:17:23 - 00:56:40:12
Abhishek: I mean there are all these fantastic Buddhist caves in the city of Bombay that people don't know about or don't go to, sites like Kanheri, where you can spend two weeks studying the richness or the embedded nature of embedded material nature or Buddhism. So that's something that we are debating and thinking about and it may eventually happen.

00:56:41:10 - 00:56:51:18
Sarah: To kind of summarize our conversation today, which has been really fruitful and interesting, where do you see your teaching developing? What would you like to continue to cultivate in the coming years?

00:56:53:02 - 00:58:55:00
Abhishek: Well this course on Buddhism, Business, State is exciting for me and it's one way for me to relate one of the research projects that I am doing with scholars in U.S. and Japan, about the history of Buddhism between 5th and 12th century, this is to understand early medieval Buddhism and the reasons for its decline, and again, the theory of decline is something that has been heavily perpetuated without careful study of the 12th, 13th, and 14th centuries, and that's an area of focus that I would like to explore in future. So that's one side, and then the second is the digital study of Buddhism, the digital humanities project on the Sacred Center, where I would like to somehow make Bodh Gaya more accessible by creating a detailed database which links all the material that are there in different museums. I think these museums are also scanning their images, their sculptures, and putting them online. Maybe soon we will have a platform to correlate all of these digital images on one platform. But at the same time, I have my own images and I have been in conversation with scholars who have worked on Bodh Gaya or other sites in the area for the last 40 years I would say, Janice Leoshko, and **Rick Asher,** and it'll be good if I can get some of their pictures to compare and contrast how Bodh Gaya was in 1980's, how it was in the 90's and the early 2000's and now, and then with **Rick Asher** you can go all the way to the 70's and 60s. So that would be another area that I think I would like to build upon.

00:58:55:21 - 00:59:05:03
Sarah: Well thank you so much for speaking with us today, Abhishek. Thank you so much for taking the time out and sharing with us about your teaching.

00:59:05:05 - 00:59:12:26
Abhishek: Thank you Sarah, thank you for including me in the podcast, and I look forward to our continued conversation.

00:59:12:28 - 00:59:13:20
Sarah: Absolutely.

00:59:15:01 - 00:59:23:09
Sarah: Thank you to Abishek for sharing so much with us that day and for speaking so honestly about your teaching. We wish you very well as you continue to learn and grow as a teacher.

00:59:24:02 - 01:00:09:17
Sarah: Thank you all so much for listening and being here with us for this conversation. For reference to the resources that we discussed in this episode, please be sure to check our show notes, and if you like what you heard, please subscribe to our podcast, The Circled Square. This has been an interesting conversation about how to teach effectively with material culture and with digital humanities projects, so we'd love to know your thoughts about ways that you've tried this in the class. More broadly, we'd love to hear from you about this podcast or anything related to teaching Buddhist studies. So please get in touch on our website, send us an email, find us on Facebook... Let us know about your questions. A very big special thanks to our creative director, Dr. Betsy Moss, who's in charge of making these podcasts here in Toronto. And thank you for listening. Be well!