Sacred & Profane Season 2, Episode 1: A Lotus Blossoms Above Muddy Water

[00:00:00] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Welcome to Sacred & Profane, a show about religion in unexpected places. I'm Martien Halvorson-Taylor.

[00:00:08] **Kurtis Schaeffer** And I'm Kurtis Schaeffer.

[00:00:10] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Today's show explores the question of how we define and practice religious freedom in the United States, and how American Buddhists helped expand our understanding of religious freedom, even as their own freedoms were under threat.

[00:00:32] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Our story starts in the spring of 1906, when a Zen priest named Nyogen Senzaki sat down in San Francisco. He was writing a letter to his family back home in Japan. He wanted to assure them that he was doing well, that his decision to stay in America was the right one.

[00:00:52] **Reader (Nyogen Senzaki)** To my family, I am now staying with a school teacher, and she's teaching me rhetoric. And perhaps someday I can be a journalist for an American newspaper.

[00:01:08] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** But his real reason for coming to the U.S. wasn't to become a journalist.

[00:01:15] **Reader (Nyogen Senzaki)** The main reason for my coming to America is to transmit Zen to this country. That's why my teacher, Soyen Shaku used his own pocket money to pay for my travel expenses.

[00:01:29] **Duncan Williams** He viewed kind of his mission to be a kind of missionary of Buddhism to Americans.

[00:01:37] **Duncan Williams** My name is Duncan Ryūken Williams. I'm a professor at USC in Religion, as well as American Studies and Ethnicity.

[00:01:48] **Duncan Williams** And Nyogen Senzaki grew up in Japan hearing stories from people like Soyen Shaku (who became his teacher) about this place called America, and what it offered the world in terms of religious pluralism and freedom. And, I think he often identified the kind of Zen Buddhist idea of liberation with the American notion of freedom. And so he had these kind of very optimistic and positive images of this country. And he felt that Americans would take easily to especially his style of Buddhism.

[00:02:30] **Kurtis Schaeffer** That wasn't the only thing that made him certain that Buddhism would take root in America.

[00:02:36] **Duncan Williams** He used the word bukkyō tōzen. In English, maybe translated like the eastward advance of Buddhism. And in Japan, they had this idea about the Buddha before he died, gave a—how do you say—almost like a prophecy, although his physical body would no longer exist, his teachings would remain. And that these teachings would move eastward. Nyogen Senzaki took it to mean he's crossing the Pacific to advance Buddhism to the United States.

[00:03:20] **Reader (Nyogen Senzaki)** What I am doing here now is enduring what is hard to endure, doing what is difficult to do. My main vocation is the Buddha Dharma.

[00:03:37] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Despite Senzaki's belief that Buddhism and American culture were compatible, and perhaps even destined to come together, his progress spreading the Dharma was slow. Anti-Japanese bias was pervasive in California. He struggled to find work. He

was attacked in the streets. And he bought a pistol for protection. Reading between the lines of his letters, you can sense his frustration. In 1908, he wrote to a friend about a summer trip to the Sierras. He enjoyed it and ended up resting for a few months near Lake Tahoe.

[00:04:20] **Reader (Nyogen Senzaki)** Then I went into the state of Nevada and visited Reno. However, Reno was not ready for the Bhudda Dharma.

[00:04:34] **Kurtis Schaeffer** But through it all, the conviction that he was meant to spread, the Buddha's word never faded.

[00:04:45] **Reader (Nyogen Senzaki)** When working together with immigrants from Europe and Africa, I always tell myself that the land on which I stand now may someday become the land of Buddha Dharma. The person who punches me today may someday become a Buddha. The person who treats me with contempt may eventually become happy. I keep repeating this to myself.

[00:05:15] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Only after nearly 20 years in America, would he finally succeed in building a permanent Zen temple in Los Angeles. The temple attracted not just Japanese immigrants and their children, but Latino and Anglo followers as well. For about a decade, the temple grew, but all of that changed on February 19, 1942.

[00:05:37] **Duncan Williams** After the executive order issued by President Roosevelt, Executive Order 9066.

[00:05:43] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** The order gave the army authority to remove anyone from the West Coast deemed a threat to the U.S. war effort.

[00:05:51] **Duncan Williams** There is no constitutional basis for usually, you know, removing people, putting them in prison. You'd need to have some kind of process of finding somebody committed a crime.

[00:06:01] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** While the order didn't specifically name any ethnic group. It would be applied almost exclusively to people of Japanese descent, many of whom were American citizens.

[00:06:12] **Duncan Williams** Roughly 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry were forcibly removed from their homes and placed in these 10 large war relocation authority camps, as they called them.

[00:06:25] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Senzaki was among them.

[00:06:31] **Reader (Nyogen Senzaki)** Thus, I've heard. The army ordered all Japanese faces to be evacuated. This homeless monk has nothing but a Japanese face.

[00:06:44] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** He was ordered to report to a makeshift assembly point, a sprawling racetrack east of L.A. called Santa Anita. Nearly 20,000 people were housed there. Many in stables and horse stalls until permanent camps farther inland were finished. Eventually, Senzaki boarded a train headed for a more permanent camp at Heart Mountain, Wyoming. He didn't know it yet, but he would remain there for three years.

[00:07:19] **Duncan Williams** He writes this poem called "Leaving Santa Anita."

[00:07:24] **Reader (Nyogen Senzaki)** A government must practice its policy without sentiment. This morning, the winding train, like a big black snake takes us away as far as Wyoming. A current of Buddhist thoughts always runs eastward. The policy may support the tendency of the teaching. Who knows?

[00:07:54] **Duncan Williams** So this policy is obviously referring to the U.S. Army policy of the forced removal and incarceration. But he's somehow equating moving from California to Wyoming as I guess part of that inevitable eastward movement of the Buddhist teachings.

[00:08:16] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Duncan says that by volume, more has been written on the subject of Japanese incarceration during World War II than almost any other moment in American history. But what's often left out of that discussion is the role of Buddhism.

[00:08:32] **Duncan Williams** The vast majority of that community was Buddhist, about 80 percent. And that fact seemed both one of the factors as to why they were incarcerated. But also it's that which helped people who were in these camps survive the incarceration. Right after Pearl Harbor - in fact, even before the smoke had cleared - they began arresting people who were on the FBI's National Threat List called the "ABC List." The very first person arrested after Pearl Harbor was a Buddhist priest, Gikyō Kuchiba, the head priest at the Honpa Hongwanji Buddhist Temple, the largest temple in Honolulu. One would think, you know, maybe they go after consular officials or, but Buddhist priests in the minds of the intelligence agencies at that time were among those constituting the highest level threat to national security.

[00:09:37] **Kurtis Schaeffer** So we see Buddhist priests being arrested just after Pearl Harbor, and they're arrested quickly because they were already on government watch lists. But, Duncan, you found evidence that agents also had some discretion. I'm thinking of a moment you write about with a woman who was a Japanese language teacher, which was another group that the FBI was already watching.

[00:10:00] **Duncan Williams** That's right. Most Buddhist Japanese language school teachers or Buddhist priests are without question, just taken away. But the fact that this person had on their mantelpiece in their home a picture of Jesus Christ, triggered in that FBI agent's mind that this family had something in common with him, as a fellow Christian. So I think because of this idea that America is a Christian nation, you know, people kind of viewed belonging, but also loyalty, as if they couldn't assimilate racially to be white, at least assimilate religiously to be Christian. They find it easier to see somebody else as a fellow American.

[00:10:54] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Eventually, after Roosevelt's executive order, Buddhists and Christians alike were forcibly removed from their homes in Oregon, Washington, and California.

[00:11:04] **Newsreel** A caravan of Japanese-owned trucks and pleasure cars heads inland from the Pacific. Aliens ordered out of strategic coastal zones, they are allowed all the personal belongings and household goods they can carry. They go to make their homes under Uncle Sam's surveillance for the duration.

[00:11:25] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** The government depicted the camps as an unfortunate necessity of war and a temporary inconvenience to those that were sent there.

[00:11:35] **Newsreel** Here in the land of Buffalo Bill, the government is erecting model camp towns, towns in which they live unmolested, not as prisoners, but free to work and paid by the United States government. Bathtubs. Yes, all the comforts of home. The Japanese in America are finding Uncle Sam a loyal master, despite the war.

[00:11:58] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** The reality was the facilities were bare bones at best. Many of the camps were in the high desert or plains, unprotected from the weather. Uninsulated buildings grew hot during the day and unbearably cold at night.

[00:12:16] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Despite official policies protecting free speech and freedom of religion at the camps, Buddhists were still treated with extra suspicion, starting when their bags were searched on arrival at assembly points like Santa Anita.

[00:12:29] **Duncan Williams** The rule was that you could only take what you could carry. So that meant for most people like a suitcase. What are you going to put in that suitcase? And anything written in the Japanese language, right, a Buddhist scripture or even a book of poetry was considered contraband and confiscated. The only exception was English Japanese Dictionary, which would have Japanese in it. And then a Christian Bible in Japanese.

[00:12:57] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Buddhist practitioners found themselves in a strange place for an unknown amount of time. They were largely without shrines, statues, or even the texts that would have guided their worship at home.

[00:13:10] **Duncan Williams** So one of the things about the Buddhist tradition generally is that in its 2,500 year history as it moved from India to China or Tibet or Japan or Thailand, or of course, the United States, the Buddha taught that everything is impermanent. And that general law of the world applies to itself. So Buddhism is also changeable. And one of the other teachings in the Sanskrit, it's called upaya, or in Japanese hoben, but it translates roughly into "skillful adaptations" into English. And so it's the idea that the Buddha, when he was preaching and speaking to people about the teachings, would adapt skillfully his message according to the time and place, so that the religion would not be some kind of abstract set of ideas, but really work for the people who were in front of him to do what Buddhism is meant to do, which is to alleviate suffering. It's not surprising that inside of one of these internment camps, people needed to skillfully adapt Buddhism.

[00:14:33] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Priests like Nyogen Senzaki transformed tarpaper barracks into temple halls. They wrote out the sutras from memory. Lay people adapted, too. Take celebrations for the Buddha's birthday, which is usually celebrated in April in Japanese tradition.

[00:14:54] **Duncan Williams** Usually what you have is a small statue of a baby Buddha. Ritually, people go up and pour some sweet tea on that baby Buddha statue. And it's usually in a little shrine that has flowers on it. And the reason is, in classic Buddhism, the birth of the Buddha is said to have been of such joy to the heavens that the heavens rained flowers and sweet rain.

[00:15:32] **Kurtis Schaeffer** None of this was available.

[00:15:35] **Duncan Williams** They don't have sweet tea, they don't have the flowers, they don't have a Buddha statue. But one of them figures out how to go to the mess hall, find some wrapping paper, die it with some beets to make it red so that they could fold some flowers out of some of that wrapping paper. They also had rationed sugar and coffee. They made a sweet coffee drink and they found the largest carrot that they could find in the mess hall and one of the young men who was good at carving carved a semblance of a Buddha statue out of it. So they held that first Buddha's birthday ceremony in camp, pouring sweet coffee on a carrot Buddha.

[00:16:34] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** In his research, Duncan came across that kind of skillful adaptation again and again. People found a way to practice their faith behind barbed wire. For some practitioners, like Nyogen Senzaki, the adaptations demanded by camp life would become a way of trying to make their detention meaningful.

[00:17:02] **Reader (Nyogen Senzaki)** Morning haze gives an illusion of California. The East Wind promises the coming of spring within the snow-covered plateau of internment. Evacuees can go no place else they can admire only the gorgeous sunrise, beyond the barbed wire fence, above the hills and mountains.

[00:17:36] **Duncan Williams** One of the ideas that runs deeply in Senzaki's thought, as well as others, is that metaphor of the lotus flower blossoming above muddy water. The lotus flower representing, you know, the Buddha's awakening and kind of freedom, and you know, the world of difficulty and suffering— the muddy water. In Senzaki's writing, and in so many other people who were priests in camp, it's not simply about seeing that sunrise beyond that barbed wire—finding a way to kind of transcend or go beyond the place where they're at. But, there's also another sense you can only see that sunrise, beyond that barbed wire by being in camp. That, it's precisely those

difficulties, those sufferings, that loss and dislocation, all those things that is the meaning of being in camp, that actually helps you become free. There's a another priest who talked about it.

[00:18:46] **Kurtis Schaeffer** This priest was arrested on December 7th, hours after the Pearl Harbor attack in the middle of giving a sermon at his temple in Honolulu.

[00:18:56] **Duncan Williams** He isn't given the opportunity to go back and get a change of clothes or any suitcase or anything. He's just taken. And so there he is some months later, asked to give the sermon for the Buddha's birthday. And so he is talking about kind of the rebirth of Buddhist practice in camp. He's talking about the birth of the Buddha and he's referring to his robes, which are very dirty because he hadn't, you know, had a change of clothes since December. And he's like, you know, even though my robes are dusty, just like that muddy water, we have to find a way to grow the lotus out of these robes. This dusty, dirty condition of being in camp. And I think, that kind of sentiment, that you can see those beautiful mountains, that beautiful sunrise, despite your difficult condition, that's referred to in that Senzaki poem, that's the kind of sentiment that helped people to look forward.

[00:20:01] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Duncan, do you think these metaphors resonated with regular people in the camps, not just the priests?

[00:20:07] **Duncan Williams** So I had a chance to interview about 120 camp survivors for this book. And, you know, while they wouldn't necessarily refer specifically to this poem or that poem, the Buddhist ideas of impermanence, of being able to be patient as a virtue, being able to take what ingredients you have in your life and making the best out of it. People who recall how camp life was like—of course they refer to everything from like, you know, how bad the food was or how, you know, those are facts, too. But I think in terms of reflection, or what the meaning of camp was, a lot of ordinary people, perhaps even more than the priests, found some way to make sense of their experience, found some way to find something worthy or meaningful or significant about their camp experience. And I think it's mainly because they needed to find some way to be able to, in a very practical sense, help their kids, that next generation kind of move forward and be able to explain to their kids how to view it, and how not to be defeated by it.

[00:21:37] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Because this is a very traumatic event, not just in the sense that it's disruptive emotionally or financially to be ripped from your home, but also because it's traumatic physically for many people.

[00:21:50] **Duncan Williams** That's right. Because the camps were hastily built, these tarpaper barracks often had holes in them, you get scorpions, you get things crawling in, and at night it is very cold. One of the things that I write about in the book, are the great number of funerals that need to take place that first winter of '42. And so it was tough for people who were just living fairly normal lives before the war to suddenly be in these kind of situations. And those who are most vulnerable, the very young babies and the elderly, even though the internees did their best to try to make their barracks more livable and so forth. Those who are a little bit less healthy or very elderly people, they all passed away that first winter.

[00:22:45] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** All told, 1,800 people would die in the camps by the end of the war.

[00:22:51] **Duncan Williams** So Buddhism became critical to families who not only lost everything they worked for before the war, but now they are losing family members. The priests who are in these camps who perform the funerals and memorial services, they unfortunately became in more high demand than one would have hoped. But the fact that they were able to do funerals was also a source of comfort for many families.

[00:23:20] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** I was struck by something you wrote in the introduction. I expected the second sentence to be different from what you said. You wrote, "Far from threatening the fabric of American life, Japanese-American Buddhists during World War II strengthened it.

Their story stands as powerful testimony to Americans' foundational claim to be a nation of religious freedom." And you continue. I would have thought you would have said it would have stood as powerful testimony against that claim.

[00:23:55] **Duncan Williams** I think the understanding of Asian-American Buddhists, and especially Japanese-American Buddhists in this time period, was that their experience, whether it was immigration, naturalization, alien land laws, that there was just innumerable challenges to belonging in America. I think they're staking a claim in what it means to be American. These constitutional ideals, whether it be equality under the law, due process, religious freedom—were earned, were things that had to be embodied by people. Otherwise, it's just words on a piece of paper. They had to embody it to actualize it. And when your government tells you, you don't belong, when society and the media tells you that Buddhism is a threat to national security, and yet you persist in that, and yet you believe that there is a place for you and your faith in America? That, I think, is something that is actually necessary for religious freedom to come true.

[00:25:26] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Sacred & Profane was produced for the Religion, Race and Democracy Lab at the University of Virginia. Our senior producer is Emily Gadek. Our program manager is Ashley Duffalo. Kelly Jones is the Lab's editor. Today's guest was Duncan Ryūken Williams, author of *American Sutra: A Story of Faith and Freedom in the Second World War*. Eddy Toru Ono read the words of Nyogen Senzaki.

[00:25:54] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Music for this episode comes from Blue Dot Sessions. You can find out more about our work at religionlab.virginia.edu, or by following us on Twitter @TheReligionLab. If you like the show, head over to iTunes or the platform of your choice to write and review us. It really makes a difference for new shows like ours.