

# **A Pioneer in the Canadian Buddhist Landscape: Remembering Rev. Dr. Leslie Kawamura**

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**Leslie Sumio Kawamura** was born July 7, 1935 in the Raymond, Alberta Buddhist temple where his father Reverend Yutetsu was minister. Leslie's father had been sent to Western Canada from Japan to minister to the growing number of Jodo Shinshu Buddhists. As a young boy Leslie spent his early years in Southern Alberta, including the period of internment forced upon Japanese-Canadians during World War II. After the war the Kawamura family settled back in Raymond, Alberta where his father, and later Leslie would minister to the local Buddhist community. Before Leslie would minister to the Jodo Shinshu community of Southern Alberta he went off to pursue an education that would take him to the United States and Japan.

Leslie's career in Buddhist Studies began in California where he would obtain a B.A. in philosophy from San Francisco State College in 1958. By 1964 he had earned two Masters degrees from Ryukoku University and Kyoto University. Leslie's academic path led to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan where he pursued a Ph.D. with Dr. Herbert Guenther in the Department of Far Eastern Studies at the University of Saskatoon. Having completed his Ph.D. in 1976 Leslie returned to Alberta to take up the position of assistant professor in the newly formed Department of Religious Studies at the University of Calgary. Leslie quickly moved up in rank to full professor and remained at the University of Calgary until his death on March 10, 2011.

I met Prof. Kawamura in the fall of 2000 when I enrolled as one of his graduate students. While I earned a Ph.D. in 2006 I remained his unofficial student and friend until his death. In the time I knew Leslie I came to admire his passion for Buddhist Studies, for mentoring students, and for fostering the Jodo Shinshu communities across Canada.

Leslie's academic achievements were numerous, yet he remained humble about his success in the field. His work on Yogacara and Madhyamika will continue to be referenced for years to come. Leslie's

passion for Buddhist Studies was always evident in the countless hours he spent translating texts and working with his students, both in and out of the classroom. After Leslie's death, students from decades past made known the impact he had on them as young students. I think the most important thing to emphasize about Leslie is the compassion he showed to his students. It was more than the time and effort he put into ensuring his students' academic success, but the concern he showed for their overall wellbeing. When news spread of Leslie's death his former graduate students from around the world gathered in Calgary to discuss what exactly it was that made him such a special man and teacher. It was unanimous, Leslie was more than a mentor; he was a father figure to many of us.

In the thirty-five years Leslie spent at the University of Calgary he worked tirelessly to ensure the viability of Buddhist Studies in the Department of Religious Studies. Leslie was responsible for the success of the Numata Chair in Buddhist Studies in the department. In order to guarantee his students remained competitive in the field, he invited top scholars to the University of Calgary. At the end of his career, Leslie became Numata Chair holder, a position he was pleased to take on believing that he had secured the future of Buddhist Studies at the University of Calgary.

Leslie's tireless efforts were not limited to his academic work and students. Leslie remained an active member in the Jodo Shinshu communities in Canada until his death. The last few years of his life were spent as the director of the Living Dharma Centre an organization within the Jodo Shinshu Buddhist Temples of Canada. The Living Dharma Centre's mission is to increase the presence and understanding of Jodo Shinshu across Canada. Leslie devoted his efforts towards this mission, traveling across Canada to the different Shin communities and temples, and organizing events to educate Canadians about Jodo Shinshu.

For his students and his colleagues, Leslie set the bar high. He demanded excellence from his students, from himself, and he showed a level of compassion that others can hope to emulate. His selflessness can only be compared to that of a *bodhisattva*. Leslie's legacy in Buddhist Studies and the Jodo Shinshu community will continue in his academic work, his students, and his dharma teachings.