

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<http://journals.sfu.ca/cjbs/index.php/cjbs/index>

Number 12, 2017

A Reflection on Dr. Lewis Lancaster's Visit to Fo Guang Shan Temple on October 9th, 2016

Crystal M. Beaudoin

McMaster University

Copyright Notice: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author.

A Reflection on Dr. Lewis Lancaster's Visit to Fo Guang Shan Temple on October 9th, 2016

Crystal M. Beaudoin
MCMASTER UNIVERSITY

Walking through the forest on an autumn day, we appreciate the lovely red, yellow, and orange colours of the leaves. We smell them and hear them under our feet as we hike along. Yet our encounters with the forest are very much akin to virtual reality. Our experiences of the colourful, fragrant leaves and the cool autumn air are empty of these things themselves. We do not have the leaves themselves in our heads; rather our brains perceive the leaves from the light reflecting off them, the pressure of the sound waves on our eardrums when we step on them, and the chemical changes associated with smelling them. At the same time, while the forest we see is empty, it comes to us in form. Our brains create the smell, sound and images in the form of leaves. Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form. This is the profound wisdom of the bodhisattva, as illustrated in the Perfection of Wisdom (*Prajñāpāramitā*) literature.

This literature was the topic of Dr. Lewis Lancaster's talk at Fo Guang Shan temple on Sunday, November 9th, 2016. Dr. Lancaster was warmly welcomed by many Venerables, volunteers, and community members. He came to us from the Institute of East Asian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Dr. Lancaster began his talk by discussing a conversation between Śākyamuni Buddha and his disciples in

the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8000 Lines* (Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā). In this text, the Buddha asks his disciples about a bodhisattva's understanding of the perfection of wisdom. After recounting this episode and introducing the teachings of this and other Perfection of Wisdom texts, Dr. Lancaster transitioned into a discussion about the Buddha's quest to learn about suffering. He pointed out that we, like the Buddha, can learn more from the body than from the mind. The Buddha witnessed the bodies of the three great messengers who remind us of the reality of death: an elderly person, a sick person, and a dead person. Dr. Lancaster pointed out that if one wishes to understand change, one only needs to look to the body. Yet the body itself is not suffering; it is our perception of the body that causes us to suffer.

In fact, Buddhism is the only religion that starts with consideration for how we perceive the world with our senses. Buddhism and the field of neuroscience share similar understandings of human experience. Our eyes interpret different wavelengths of light as colours, and our ears interpret the pressure of different soundwaves as different noises. We must start with our sensorium, all of the sensations we experience through sight, smell, hearing, touch and taste, and we must recognize that these experiences are empty. The sensorium is crucial to our understanding of the world. Yet we must understand that our experience of the world through the sensorium is not reality. Although some people may object to the taste of cilantro, others quite like it. Cilantro has no nature or suchness; our judgement of cilantro is based on our experiences of smelling it, touching it, tasting it, etc., which cause each of us to perceive it in a certain way. Although there is an external world, our brains only give us partial access to it. From the *Heart Sūtra* (Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya), we come to understand that form is no different from emptiness, and emptiness is no different from form. Similarly, *nirvāṇa* is no different from *saṃsāra*, and mental states neither arise nor cease. With access to this wisdom, we become less attached to our expe-

riences. There is a change in what we think we know, and we can feel compassion and love. The Perfection of Wisdom literature is depicted as a beautiful goddess (a mother) in artwork because it is the source of all wisdom and teaches us about reality. The message of the mother is that form is emptiness and emptiness is form. As long as we understand this message, we understand the teaching of the bodhisattva from the Prajñāpāramitā.

Dr. Lancaster is indeed an exemplar of wisdom. He discussed this profound topic in an engaging way, using anecdotes and metaphors to enhance our understanding. It was a privilege to hear him speak, and his audience was truly grateful for the opportunity to learn from him. For those who are interested in watching his talk at Fo Guang Shan, you may access a video [here](#).