

## **A Review of *Wild Geese: Buddhism in Canada***

As an integral contribution to Canadian studies, *Wild Geese* (Edited by John S. Harding, Victor Sōgen Hori, and Alexander Soucy. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010. 460 pp., \$29.95. ISBN: 9780773536678) offers its readers a scope into Buddhist practices from the coast of Vancouver to the shores of Cape Breton Island. The text presents a story of Buddhism previously untold; its narrative unfolds through the many pages of historical overviews, insightful biographies, and examples of Buddhist practices in Canada's multicultural society. The book is directed towards an audience interested in Buddhism and the social changes brought about with its introduction to Canada. It is not an introduction to Buddhism as a religion; rather, it is an account of the unique social phenomenon of Buddhist globalization. Offering an account of Buddhism in Canada for over 100 years, *Wild Geese* explores a changing religion and culture that is expanding across the landscape. The book is not specific to any one school of Buddhism, nor does it focus on large cities where Buddhism might be expected to flourish. Instead, small communities are chronicled which may have otherwise been overlooked. Perhaps more importantly, the articles of this anthology aim to expose Canadian Buddhism as the unique, albeit young tradition it is.

While Buddhism in Canada may be thought to be an extension of Buddhism from its motherland, this book shows how and why this is not the case. Canadian Buddhism is unique from the Buddhism of its Eastern ancestors as it takes root in new soil. The history of Buddhism in Canada is separated into two parts: before 1967 and after 1967. Editors Harding, Hori, and Soucy explore Buddhism before the 1960s and after the 1960s when "people rejected conventional religion and sought a new spirituality."<sup>1</sup> Through a collection of various essays into their anthology, these editors provide a spotlight for under-represented Buddhist thought in Canadian culture. The editors highlight the rise of Buddhist sects from coast to coast and also provide a brief introduction to prominent Buddhist Canadian authors. Harding, Hori, and Soucy mention that they do not provide a conclusive story of Buddhism in Canada; it was not their intention to. Instead, they wish to give an informed account of Buddhism as it exists in Western society, and give rise to a growing knowledge of Canadian Buddhism. Although diverse and comprehensive, as we will

show, this anthology may have benefited from additional essay submissions in specific sections.

The editors organize their collection into five sections: *Openings, Histories and Overviews, From Global to Local, From Local to Global, and Lives*. These sections are helpful in giving a broad scope into the Buddhist culture within Canada.

In the first part, two essays are included which emphasize what is required to accurately describe Buddhism in Canada. By examining these essays, this section highlights the lack of specific statistical data pertaining to Western practitioners of Buddhism. Despite its appearance in Canada over 100 years ago and despite its exceptional influence since the 1960s, we still do not have a consistent story. The essays emphasize that Canadian Buddhism is essentially Canadian; it is not a foreign, Eastern tradition. Instead, it has become a very common Western practice. As Victor Sōgen Hori states, “when people in [Canadian cities] pass the doors of a local Chinese Buddhist temple, they assume that they are seeing a quaint religion lifted from the rice paddies of Asia and dropped onto a Canadian street to serve the needs of the ethnic community.”<sup>2</sup> Canadian Buddhism is unique from Eastern tradition and therefore Hori wishes to abolish the assumed disconnect between Westerners and Eastern traditions in the West. That which appears foreign ought to be recognized as a familiar, integral part of *Canadian* society.

In Part Two, Harding, Hori, and Soucy include three essays focusing on the historical spread of Buddhism across the nation. Beginning with the initial introduction of Buddhism from the early 1900s to the late 1960s, Buddhism was generally seen as a strange threat to the comfortably settled residents of the West. Originally when Easterners brought Buddhism with them to Canadian soil, there was hostility and reluctance to the foreign religion, which brought about “rampant racism against Asian and Japanese Canadians until after WWII.”<sup>3</sup> Following WWII and the 1960s, political unrest prompted people to explore alternative sources of spirituality. In addition, Canada abolished “its race-based immigration laws and adopted a race-neutral system”<sup>4</sup> which allowed for stronger integration of Buddhism into Canadian culture.

More recently, Shiu highlights the shift in Western interest. During the spread of Buddhism in the 1960s and 1970s, the introduction of Buddhist texts satisfied the scholarly interest of the general public. Soon

after these basic teachings were introduced, more profound literature was desired in order to satisfy an ever-expanding investigation of Buddhism. Following the 1960s and 1970s movement, various academics began writing different accounts of Buddhism offering different perspectives from specific points of view.

Some of these perspectives are discussed in Part Three. With a focus on specific geographical areas, the editors include five essays that explore schools of Buddhism and their effects on local communities. Readers are introduced to Jodo Shinshu in Alberta, Lao Buddhism in Ontario, Zen Buddhism in Toronto, Tibetan Shambhala in Halifax, and The Woodenfish Program across the country. Regardless of the school of Buddhism, the goal is to promote peace between all ethnic communities. As the Woodenfish Program mentions, there is a collaborative focus on promoting peace, equality, respect and tolerance to all.<sup>5</sup>

Taking Part Three one step further, Part Four introduces the influence of local Buddhist practice on a global scale. The first essay discusses the transformation of Buddhism within three Chinese temples in Eastern Canada and the role these temples have in spreading the religion across the country. The author discusses that these temples may be an effect of Eastern Buddhism, but now we can see these temples as a cause in and of themselves influencing Buddhism in Canada and abroad. The last essay gives a brief history of Tibetan Buddhism in Canada, and examines Tibetan Buddhist communities in the West. It addresses an understanding for skillful means required in order to preserve Tibetan religion and culture in Canada.<sup>6</sup> These essays explore the causes for preservation of Buddhism: textual preservation, philosophical inquiry, and the documentation of life stories and practices.<sup>7</sup>

Two life stories are documented in the final section of *Wild Geese*. A biographical account of Albert Low and Suwanda H.J. Sugunasiri are provided in order to highlight under-recognized contributors to the preservation of Buddhism in Canada. The first biography follows the life of Zen master Albert Low in order to help popularize his work accomplished through the Montreal Zen Centre. Born in East London, Low was initially unfamiliar with the roots of Buddhism. Before discovering Buddhism in Canada, Low traveled to South Africa to teach Scientology. Continuing on his spiritual quest, he was introduced to Zen via a psychologist and moved to Montreal to work at the Montreal Zen Centre under Philip Kapleau. The biography is an edited,

informational interview with Low on his personal interactions with Buddhism in Canada. Similarly, the second biography of Suwanda H.J. Sugunasiri investigates the life of a man who began his spiritual inquiry outside of Canada. Born in Sri Lanka and educated in three different countries, Sugunasiri plays an integral role in the promotion of Buddhism in Canada. Not only is he completely dedicated to Buddhism; he is also the founder of Nalanda College of Buddhist Studies in Toronto, Ontario. His biography is a testament to his contribution to tireless efforts in sustaining the ever-growing Buddhist communities in Ontario. These individuals are essential to recognizing the adaptation of Buddhism in Canada.

Upon reflection of *Wild Geese*, it is evident this anthology may have benefited from additional biographies and life stories from Buddhist practitioners. Not only would it be helpful to understand Canadian Buddhism through more life stories of practitioners in Canada, it would also be informative to hear the stories of Canadian practitioners abroad. This would give readers a more in-depth account of the effect Canadian Buddhism has on the world. Also, the editors mention McLellan and Matthews – two essential writers who act as a foundation to textual evidence of Buddhism in Canada. A biographical inclusion of said writers may have been helpful in grasping the basics of the project this anthology is set out to accomplish.

Although an effective account of Buddhism in Canada was provided, solutions to remaining obstacles in embracing Buddhism as a Canadian religion are not investigated in depth. That being said, Harding, Hori, and Soucy provide a collection of essays that succeed in informing the reader about the historical accounts of Buddhism in Canada and its incorporation into Canadian society. For those who have a foundation in understanding Buddhist culture, this text is essential to understanding how Canada has adopted Eastern Buddhist traditions into a noteworthy movement of its own. *Wild Geese* is an important and necessary step in the right direction towards promoting the growth of the Canadian Buddhist phenomenon.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Harding, John S., Hori, Victor Sōgen, Soucy, Alexander. *Wild Geese*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Hori, Victor Sōgen. "How Do We Study Buddhism in Canada." *Wild Geese*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Watada, Terry. "Japanese Canadians and Jodo Shinshu Buddhism." *Wild Geese*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010. 79.

<sup>4</sup> Shiu, Henry C.H.. "Buddhism After the Seventies." *Wild Geese*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010. 85.

<sup>5</sup> Verchery, Lina. "The Woodenfish Program: Fo Guang Shan, Canadian Youth, and a New Generation of Buddhist Missionaries." *Wild Geese*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010. 211.

<sup>6</sup> Haynes, Sarah F. "A Relationship of Reciprocity: Globalization, Skilful means, and Tibetan Buddhism in Canada." *Wild Geese*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010. 322-3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 343.

