

CONFERENCE

Buddhism in Canada

State of the Art and Future Directions

On May 24-26, 2005 Nalanda College of Buddhist Studies presented, as part of the '100 Years of Buddhism in Canada' celebrations in Toronto, an academic conference at Trinity College in the University of Toronto to consider the 'State of the Art of Buddhism in Canada and its Future Directions.' The event was held in collaboration with the Yehan Numata Program in Buddhist Studies at the University of Toronto at Mississauga, and was endorsed by Science for Peace.

The keynote presentation for the Conference was provided by Prof. Victor Hori, Associate Professor, McGill University, as part of the Opening Ceremony at the University of St. Michael's College on Tuesday, May 24th. His presentation, "Buddhism in Canada: an Historical Overview," incorporated a fascinating array of data, statistics, historic images, and his own lively, personal commentary. He sketched the various phases and ethnic components of Buddhism in Canada, as well as some of its key issues and developments.

The Conference then moved across campus to the George Ignatieff Theatre in Trinity College for the next two days for the main part of its programme, which was an examination of the 'state of the art' of Buddhism in Canada, with a look to its future. The venue proved to be a marvellous setting for excellent papers and lively discussions!

Wednesday, May 25:

Prof. Peter Beyer, Chair, Department of Classics and Religious Studies, University of Ottawa, provided a "Statistical Overview of Buddhism in Canada." Through commentary on ample, well-presented graphics, Prof. Beyer examined Statistics Canada data for comparative patterns and trends in Buddhist religious identification in Canada, giving attention to ethnic, cultural, gender and generational factors. He also provided interesting critical comments on the limitations of Statistics Canada's survey questions.

Prof. Terry Woo, Chair, Department of Comparative Religion, Dalhousie University, delivered an account of "Buddhism in Nova Scotia" through a sketch of the prominent Buddhist groups in Halifax, the educational experience of students of Buddhism on Dalhousie campus, and efforts to develop chaplaincy services on campus.

Though unable to attend personally to attend, Prof. James Mullens,

Department of Religious Studies & Anthropology, University of Saskatchewan, sent a valuable study of two Buddhist communities in Manitoba and Saskatchewan: “Two Traditions, Two Teachers, One Dharma” (read by Prof. Veronique Ramses). The paper reported Prof. Mullens’ research into the efforts of two of the immigrant communities (Vajrayana and Theravada) to establish and sustain themselves in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, and to attract Euro-Canadian adherents.

Henry Shiu, Department for the Study of Religion, University of Toronto, delivered a paper, “Buddhism in Ontario,” outlining the populations and distribution of the various Buddhist communities in Canada and Ontario, their often divergent features, even within ethnic and cultural traditions, and the extent of ethnic cross-over between the traditions. And he called for the development of a distinctly Canadian form of Buddhism.

Prof. Angela Sumegi, Assistant Professor, Humanities and Religion, Carleton University, Ottawa, delivered a presentation, “Buddhism in the Capital: The Case for an Ottawa Dharma Council.” She outlined the considerable variety of Buddhist traditions and sects represented in the Ottawa area. She observed how many of these traditions are making extensive efforts to interpret themselves to interested westerners. And she considered the need and prospect for a joint body to represent Buddhism in the Ottawa area.

A general discussion of the issues surrounding and the need for a Buddhist Council of Canada concluded the day.

Thursday, May 26, 2005:

Prof. Suwanda H. J. Sugunasiri, President of Nalanda College of Buddhist Studies, outlined the Comprehensive Curriculum in Buddhadharma Studies at Nalanda College, which currently under review by the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. Approval of Nalanda College’s submission will bestow accreditation on Nalanda as a degree granting college (B.A. Buddhadharma Studies) in Ontario.

Ryann Miller, a student at Nalanda College of Buddhist Studies, delivered a paper on “Methodology in the Study of Buddhism in Canada: a Preliminary Examination.” Ms. Miller provided a methodological critique of the currently dominant model of Buddhist Studies in North America, the sociological-anthropological model. She made a case for a more contextual, historical-critical, cross-discipline, soteriological methodology.

Queenie Lo, OISE/University of Toronto, presented a paper, “Self-compassion and interpersonal functioning in adolescent offenders.” Ms. Lo critiqued the deficiencies of the current psycho-social therapy for violent offenders: strengthening self esteem. She argued for the effectiveness and appropriateness of an alternative approach based on mindfulness, empathy and compassion, first for oneself and then for others.

Prof. Michael Berman, Department of Philosophy, Brock University, St. Catharines, delivered a paper, "A Metaphysics of Morality: Kant and Buddhism." Despite the common view that Kant's philosophy is all about pure reason and the Buddha's teaching of compassion is all about emotion and the heart, Prof. Berman developed the affective components of Kant's pure practical reason and the intellectual component of Buddhist compassion. The result, he contended, is a remarkably similar emotional rationality. In both cases morality is grounded in understanding.

Prof. Mark Siderits, Department of Philosophy, Illinois State University, in his presentation, "Are Empty Persons Free?" addressed the apparent contradiction between the Buddhist view that persons are empty of self, essence or own-being and the moral responsibility to keep the precepts, seek nirvana and be compassionate. Through close philosophical analysis of the notions of causation, the distinction between parts/the whole, and the distinction between the conventional and absolute levels of truth, Prof. Siderits argued that Buddhist emptiness makes eminent sense.

A lively discussion of the full group at lunch on the final day addressed the need for a Canadian Society for Buddhist Studies. The evident consensus was that the need is not acute at this time.

- James Beckman