

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<https://thecjbs.org/>

Number 13, 2018

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the International Association of Buddhist Studies,
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The International Association of Buddhist Studies 18th Congress began in earnest on Monday, August 21st 2017. After a day full of engaging panels, participants had the opportunity to attend an evening round table at the Royal Ontario Museum. This event, entitled “Bridging Divides in Buddhist Studies,” featured a group of talented Buddhist Studies scholars, including Dr. James Benn from McMaster University, Dr. Amanda Goodman from the University of Toronto, and Dr. Juhjung Rhi from Seoul National University. Dr. Frances Garrett from the University of Toronto extended a warm welcome to everyone, and Dr. Pauline Yu, President of the [American Council of Learned Societies](#) moderated the discussion. Co-sponsored by the American Council of Learned Societies and the [Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Centre for Buddhist Studies](#) at the University of Toronto, the round table addressed the tendency among Buddhist Studies scholars to specialize in particular periods, nations, languages and disciplines. Drs. Benn, Goodman and Rhi identified

some problems associated with our propensity to form subdivisions in Buddhist Studies, and offered some suggestions to allay these problems.

Dr. Benn began the conversation by addressing the need for scholars to work with both textual materials (*sūtras*, *śāstras*, *tantras*, and *jātakas*), and historical materials in our studies. Reading what Buddhist practitioners read will enhance our understandings of certain historical practices. Dr. Benn stressed the importance of having graduate students read scriptures (in preparation for their comprehensive exams, for example). The divide between textual and historical studies is structural, rather than attitudinal. Scholars conducting historical studies are already willing to cross boundaries by working with sources such as visual materials and ethnographies. By familiarizing ourselves with Buddhist scriptures, we can further enhance our work, and effectively bridge the divide between textual and historical studies.

Dr. Goodman discussed the historical tendency of scholars to characterize the Chinese transformation of Buddhism by focusing on texts that were translated from Sanskrit into Chinese. Buddhist literature has expanded to include extra-canonical materials, and now encompasses multiple languages. Buddhism entered China via the Silk Road during the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 CE), and many of the texts translated into Chinese at that time originally existed in regional vernaculars. During the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), the Chinese government sponsored the translation of many Buddhist texts into Chinese. Indigenous Chinese scriptures also began to appear, and some of these scriptures were later translated into Tibetan and Sanskrit. Therefore, while Buddhist literature exists in Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan, we must also learn to work with sources that are in vernacular languages. Dr. Goodman studies [hybrid materials from the Dunhuang site in Western China](#). She noted that she often reads manuscripts of “mixed language,” including ritual compilations that were composed in both Tibetan and Chinese.

Dr. Goodman stressed the importance of training scholars to read local languages, in addition to canonical languages such as Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, Chinese, and Pali. She concluded that an effective way to bridge regional, linguistic, and disciplinary divides in Buddhist Studies is for scholars to become better Philologists, while also striving to become better Ethnographers, Historiographers, Art Historians, etc.

Dr. Rhi specializes in Indian Buddhist art. His talk focused on problems associated with the study of Buddhist art in Western Art History Departments. Art Historians typically do not have the philological skills necessary to work with Buddhist texts in conjunction with visual or archaeological materials; whereas Religious Studies departments do not provide adequate training in Art History. Methods associated with Western Art History are not necessarily applicable to the study of Buddhist art. Dr. Rhi concluded that in order to bridge this divide, Religious Studies departments must train students to work with visual materials, in collaboration with Art History departments.

After each of the scholars delivered their talks, the audience had an opportunity to address their questions to the panel. All three speakers stressed the importance of training students in order to bridge the divides that currently exist in the field of Buddhist Studies. Language study, collaboration, and learning to work outside of our areas of specialization are crucial if we are to succeed in this process. Thank you to Drs. Benn, Goodman, and Rhi, as well as the [Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Centre for Buddhist Studies](#) and the [American Council of Learned Societies](#) for an illuminating and thought-provoking evening.