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A Report on the Buddhist Studies in Canada Round Table Discussion at the XVIIIth Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies

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The Buddhist Studies in Canada round table discussion was one of many exciting evening events that took place at the XVIIIth Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies. It took place on Tuesday, August 22nd, 2017, at the University of Toronto's Bahen Centre for Information Technology. Invited participants travelled from all over Canada, and included Dr. Wendy Adamek from the University of Calgary, Dr. Susan Andrews from Mount Allison University, Dr. Paul Crowe from Simon Fraser University, Dr. James Benn from McMaster University, and Dr. Christoph Emmrich from the University of Toronto. Dr. Crowe served as facilitator for this lively and informative event.

At the beginning of the round table, Dr. Crowe asked the panelists to reflect on the following topics: the history and evolution of Buddhist Studies in Canada, the current status of Canadian undergraduate and graduate programs in Buddhist Studies, opportunities for cooperation between institutions, and current major research projects. Dr. Emmrich began the discussion with an overview of the brief history of Buddhist Studies in Canada. He noted that in the 1970's, the University of Toronto

was home to the largest Sanskrit department in the world. This department, which did not focus on Buddhism, fizzled out over time, and the Religious Studies department emerged in its wake. Scholars began to focus their studies on Buddhism and Hinduism, and they began to move away from working in isolated academic units, embracing a more collaborative approach. Drs. Benn and Crowe pointed out that an increase in the number of people immigrating to Canada from Asia has led to flourishing Buddhist populations in Southern Alberta, Toronto, and Vancouver. As scholars, we are very fortunate to live with and learn from Canada's Buddhist communities.

At this point, the conversation shifted to the present. Dr. Crowe asked the panelists to consider what modernizing Buddhism might mean in the Canadian context. Dr. Adamek expressed an interest in exploring the ways in which diverse Buddhist communities in Canada navigate particular historical circumstances. Dr. Emmrich noted his appreciation for the different backgrounds of Buddhist Studies Faculty in Canada, and Dr. Crowe applauded the fact that the students that are training in Canadian Buddhist Studies programs are also increasingly diverse.

Buddhist Studies is a growing field in Canada, and departments across the country are still facing some challenges. Dr. Benn pointed out that resources and funding for graduate training are issues in Canada right now. Canadian universities cannot always compete with American universities with respect to language training and standard funding, and the result is that Ph.D. graduates from Canadian institutions have a difficult time competing for jobs. Additionally, as a member of the audience explained, scholars in Quebecois universities are struggling to maintain connections with other Canadian universities, partially due to language barriers. In Quebec, many Religious Studies scholars end up working in European countries after completing their doctorate degrees, and Religious Studies departments in Quebec are becoming smaller.

Having identified some of the challenges facing Buddhist Studies scholars in Canada, our panelists moved on to discuss some of our strengths. In response to a question from the audience about teaching and resources, Dr. Andrews noted that undergraduate students in Canadian Buddhist Studies programs benefit from the excellent working relationships that exist between our universities. Projects such as the international and interdisciplinary “[From the Ground Up: Buddhism and East Asian Religions](#)” program provide research and training opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students in Canada. The *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies* also provides students with meaningful networking and professional development opportunities, particularly through its recruitment of students to write for the News Blog. Drs. Benn and Emmrich noted that at McMaster University and the University of Toronto, there is a great emphasis on using primary sources in translation in undergraduate courses on Buddhism. Dr. Adamek agreed regarding the importance of consulting with primary sources, and added that it is necessary to examine theoretical works in conjunction with these sources. As scholars, we must continually question our historical constraints, as well as the conditions under which we do our research.

In response to a question from the audience, the conversation turned to resources at Canadian universities. Buddhist Studies faculty members at Canadian institutions are generally well-funded. For example, Dr. Benn and his colleagues in the Asian field at McMaster University all currently hold SSHRC awards. The funding situation can be more complicated for graduate students. Universities in Ontario receive funding for domestic graduate students, yet it is more difficult for these institutions to fund international students. Qualified international students may choose to attend American universities over Canadian institutions for financial reasons, which is unfortunate. Hopefully this situation will change over time, because recruiting more international students would certainly enrich the field of Buddhist Studies in Canada.

The round table ended on a positive note, with a detailed description of the “From the Ground Up” program and all of the opportunities it provides for students and faculty. There was a general air of pride and optimism among our panelists, and I left the round table with a feeling of excitement with respect to the future of Buddhist Studies in Canada. Canadian Buddhist Studies scholars have a genuine enthusiasm for collaboration, pedagogy, and diversity, and these elements will most certainly play a major role in our future successes.