

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<https://thecjbs.org/>

Number 13, 2018

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held on November 3rd, 2017 at
the University of Calgary

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Cosmology as a Framework for Expression
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On November 3rd, 2017, the University of Calgary welcomed Dr. Eric Huntington (Postdoctoral Fellow, Ho Center for Buddhist Studies, Stanford University) to present his lecture, “Recentering Buddhist Cosmology: Concepts of Geographic Space in Ritual and Art,” to attending students and faculty members.¹ This lecture both problematized the use of textual sources for Indic cosmology and introduced several important examples

¹ “Recentering Buddhist Cosmology: Concepts of Geographic Space in Ritual and Art,”
Recentering Buddhist Cosmology: Concepts of Geographic Space in Ritual and Art |
Events | University of Calgary, accessed December 13, 2017,
<https://www.ucalgary.ca/events/calendar/recentering-buddhist-cosmology-concepts-geographic-space-ritual-and-art>.

of alternative cosmological thinking in ritual and artwork from India, Nepal, and Tibet.

Dr. Huntington's lecture was held as a part of the Numata Speaker Series, which is coordinated by the endowed Numata Chair, Dr. Wendi Adamek, to promote the study of Buddhism in the Department of Classics and Religious Studies, as well as to stimulate further research into Buddhism across the globe. It was a great pleasure that we could host Dr. Huntington as a part of this initiative.

Dr. Huntington studies the relationships between visual art, ritual, and philosophy in the Buddhist traditions of Tibet, Nepal, and India. His current book, *Creating the Universe: Depictions of the Cosmos in Himalayan Buddhism*, examines depictions of the cosmos, revealing ways in which cosmological thinking has been an underappreciated foundation for many aspects of religious life.²

In his lecture, Dr. Huntington sought not only to acquaint his attending audience with Buddhist cosmology in general, but also to communicate a far loftier argument—that whilst scholars often study religious cosmology through literature, its true significance can only be understood by looking beyond these conventional textual sources and instead examining rituals and artwork, which can often point to greater scope. In the forms of ritual and art, Buddhist traditions employ cosmological thinking in a much wider variety of ways, ranging from generating simple offerings to establishing the most esoteric meditations for enlightenment.

² "Eric Huntington," Eric Huntington | Religious Studies, accessed December 13, 2017, <https://religiousstudies.stanford.edu/people/eric-huntington>.

Before going into the implications of this statement, it is first helpful to examine the definition of religious cosmology. Cosmology (from the Greek κόσμος, kosmos “world” and -λογία, -logia “study of”) is the study of the origin, evolution, and eventual fate of the universe. Therefore, religious cosmology is a way of explaining the origin, the history, and the evolution of the cosmos or universe based on the religious mythology of a specific tradition.

In *The Foundations of Buddhism*, Rupert Gethin explains the view that the picture of the world presented in Buddhist cosmological descriptions cannot be taken strictly as a literal description of the shape of the universe, although there are many overlaps with real geography. Rather, it is the universe as seen through the *dibbacakkhu* (divine eye) faculty cultivated by a Buddha or an enlightened person, which allows for insight into all the different realms of reality in which beings are arising and passing as they move through different paths of rebirth.³

In Dr. Huntington’s writings, he makes no mention of the divine eye, acknowledging that some people do believe in Buddhist descriptions of the cosmos quite literally. Rather, he focuses on ways that cosmology can function beyond mere geography. Through various details, each portrayal of a Buddhist cosmos expresses a particular ideology, agenda, and history of practice. Representations of the cosmos thereby provide a way of framing these diverse aspects of religious thought and experience.

To begin his presentation, Dr. Huntington explained the significance of cosmology by reminding us of a few examples of how we visualize and make sense of the geographic space of the world in which we live. Dr. Huntington emphasized that we already use topographic maps,

³ Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 114.

weather radar maps, satellite imagery, and many other methods to depict the world—however, these methods all carry a greater implication than merely outlining our geographic space. Dr. Huntington stated that, “if we think about this a little bit more deeply, we will realize that most of these ways of depicting the world actually have something to say about us, and our interactions with the world.” According to Dr. Huntington, we may look at a weather radar map to decide if we want to bring an umbrella on a specific day or use a topographic map to find a safe spot to go hiking. As these examples illustrate, many of our ways of depicting the world are actually ways in which we decide how to interact with the world.

Dr. Huntington then broadened the discussion to ways in which images of space more deeply affect our notions of self, using a few examples from modern space exploration and astronomy, eventually revisiting a quote by American Astronomer Carl Sagan, who famously described the Earth as a “pale blue dot”—“a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena.”⁴ Sagan reflected that by gaining an understanding of Earth’s insignificance in the grander cosmos, humanity can be motivated to treat the planet, and all of its life-forms, more kindly and compassionately, knowing that this planet is the only home that we will ever have. Just as “Pale Blue Dot” forced us to take another look at the ways in which we perceive our existence as citizens of Earth, Dr. Huntington wants to expose the same processes for Buddhist cosmology, showing how thinking about space and place interact with all of these other types of ideas, such as ethics, religious practices, and other forms of ritualistic expression.

⁴ Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (New York: Random House, 1994), 7.

Dr. Huntington then went on to say that while cosmological models may contain the same geography of the world, varying depictions do not merely repeat a base “model” with a few slight tweaks, as there is much more to each body of cosmology than the textual source that appears to hold its core soteriological significance. Textual expressions of cosmology are adapted to their purposes, and can therefore not always stand alone as univocal “sources” of cosmological truth. Beyond these commonly cited sources are numerous other expressions of the Buddhist cosmos in the form of art and ritual, which often hold the real truths of how a specific tradition believes their cosmology to unfold.

Art and ritual can rely on traditions outside of literature, and therefore express unique ideas and practices. Dr. Huntington believes that it is necessary to look beyond the “authoritative” texts (such as Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośa*;⁵ 4th to 5th century CE) and instead compare the cosmologies of various arts and rituals of different Buddhist traditions. Dr. Huntington argues that these alternative expressions of cosmological thinking can provide a much broader view of the many ways that cosmological models actually function within religious thought.⁶ As Dr. Huntington stated in a paper at the 2017 International Association of Buddhist Studies conference, “the end result is an alternative to viewing a particular cosmological model as a shared backdrop for varied aspects of a religious tradition, rather seeing it as an open framework around

⁵ Dwarikadas Swami Shastri, ed., *Abhidharmakosabhasya of Acharya Vasubandhu with Sphutartha Commentary of Acarya Yasomitra*, Bauddha Bharati Series 5-6 (Varanasi: Bauddha Bharati, 1971).

⁶ “Buddhist Cosmology and Astral Science - Wed., Aug. 23rd, 9:00-12:30,” International Association for Buddhist Studies 2017 University of Toronto, accessed December 13, 2017, <http://www.iabs2017-uoft.ca/accordion-item/buddhist-cosmology-astral-science-wed-aug-23rd-900-1230/>.

which central features of a religion can be constructed and expressed.”⁷ With this perspective, Dr. Huntington is bringing this little-explored subject into the very forefront of how we practice and understand Buddhism.

As scholarship on Buddhist cosmology has not yet encompassed all traditions of ritual and artistic form, the Meru cosmos in the *Abhidharmakośa* is typically seen as the most authoritative source in Buddhist cosmology, systemically describing the world in various ways. Huntington argues, however, that Vasubandhu’s articulation of the geographic cosmos is intended to express key arguments about causality and *karma* for his philosophical project, making it incommensurate with other traditions. Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* (fifth century CE), alternatively, describes a subtly different cosmos that is primarily understood in terms of the meditative practices that lead to enlightenment.⁸ These two textual portrayals, viewed in context, present remarkably varied ways of thinking about the role of cosmology in Buddhism, as well as ways in which cosmic models can be suited to purposes. Given these differences, it becomes clear that using texts cannot be the only foundation for understanding Buddhist cosmology—ritual, art, and other non-traditional sources must also be examined.

Dr. Huntington went on to showcase different models, functions, and modes of cosmological thinking found in different Buddhist cultures, along with their ritual and artistic elements. Dr. Huntington’s carefully

⁷ “Buddhist Cosmology and Astral Science - Wed., Aug. 23rd, 9:00-12:30,” International Association for Buddhist Studies 2017 University of Toronto, accessed December 13, 2017, <http://www.iabs2017-uoft.ca/accordion-item/buddhist-cosmology-astral-science-wed-aug-23rd-900-1230/>.

⁸ Bhadantacariya Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification: Visuddhimagga*, trans. Bhikkhu Nanamoli (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1991).

selected images, enhanced by his own original diagrams and models, contributed greatly to the richness and visual impact of his presentation. In some examples, Dr. Huntington focused on the application of Meru symbolism in two neighboring Buddhist cultures, the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal and the Tibetan Buddhists of the broader Himalayas. Although the two cultures both rely on similar textual sources, their differing ritual and artistic practices have led them to understand and express the Buddhist cosmos in unique ways. In the Newar case, specific monuments in the Kathmandu Valley known as *caityas* relocate the center of Buddhist cosmology to the local geography through specific ritual acts of consecration and iconographic elements in the artistic forms. Both Newars and Tibetans also perform a ritual in which a model of the cosmos is created and offered to a teacher as a sign of respect—and differences in the ritual procedures between the Newar and Tibetan versions, based in alternative structural principles of cosmology, result in disparate ways of visualizing the universe in artwork.⁹

Even though the cultures both rely on similar textual sources, then, their ritual procedures have led them to develop significant variations on Buddhist cosmological schemes. Due to such differences between traditions, their rituals, texts and cosmological art all need to be viewed together to understand the role of cosmology in Buddhism more broadly. By comparing the relationships between individual expressions of cosmology, underlying truths about Buddhism can be further unearthed by scholars and practitioners alike.

By showcasing this vast range of cosmological conceptualizations and their applications, Dr. Huntington made it clear that understanding cosmology can unlock greater understanding of Buddhist soteriology,

⁹ Kevin R. E. Greenwood, “The Meru Cosmos in Buddhist Art and Culture,” *Dissertation Reviews*, May 26, 2015, <http://dissertationreviews.org/archives/12134>.

especially if cosmology gains more footing in the Buddhist scholarly community. Although I knew little of Buddhist cosmology prior to listening to Dr. Huntington's lecture, I was fascinated to learn how cosmology could serve as such an interesting and interdisciplinary gate into deepening my understanding of the Dharma, unifying Buddhist studies, literature studies, art history and studies of ritual practice. I would like to extend a heartfelt thank-you to Dr. Huntington for visiting our department and acquainting us with Buddhist Cosmology. For those readers who are interested in further exploring his work and its visual splendor, please visit [Dr. Huntington's blog/academic portal](#).

I look forward to providing reflections on future lectures during the 2018 academic year, and am thankful for this opportunity, as made possible by the University of Calgary Numata Chair.

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