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“Buddha and the Other” Lecture Series
(October 19 & 26, 2017)

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A Reflection on Two Lectures in the “Buddha and the Other” Lecture Series (October 19 & 26, 2017)

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In October, McGill University’s Centre for Research on Religion (CREOR) organized two lectures on the theme of “Buddha and the Other.” On October 19th, Professor Arvind Sharma’s talk investigated the relationship between Hinduism and Buddhism. The following Thursday, Professor Lara Braitstein enquired into the differences and distinctions presented in the narrative of the history of Tibetan Buddhism. Faculty members and students from McGill’s School of Religious Studies (SRS), Department of East Asian Studies, Department of Philosophy, and the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life (MORSL) participated in these lectures. Co-organized by CREOR, SRS, and Department of East Asian Studies, the [“Buddha and the Other” lecture series](#) intends to promote interdisciplinary discussion on the interdependence of the Self and the Other.

In his talk, Prof. Sharma began by recounting the popular view that Buddhism and Hinduism are two separate or even disparate traditions. According to this viewpoint, Buddhism emerged as a critique of Hinduism through its sharp refutation of the Brahminic conception of

ātman, namely, an immutable self-identity. Prof. Sharma traced the root of this popular view to colonialism. It was only after the arrival of British colonizers that a more exclusive conception of religion started to prevail in India. Under the impact of this exclusive conception, clerics in a wide range of religious traditions found it obligatory to establish the identity of their religion and subsequently demarcate themselves from followers of other traditions. Nonetheless, clergy in Buddhism and Hinduism were always in dialogue throughout history. For instance, the Buddha was once portrayed as an avatar of Vishnu in the seventh century. As Prof. Sharma contended, these two traditions were complementary to one another. Followers of Hinduism and Buddhism regarded their religions not as the ultimate truth *per se* but as different realizations of the same truth. To illustrate this relationship between Hinduism and Buddhism, Prof. Sharma utilized the cup analogy—each one of us has a distinct perception of the cup but this difference does not change the fact that we are perceiving the same cup. This example reflected Prof. Sharma's thesis on the self-other relationship, that is, the self and the other are undifferentiated without being identical.

In her talk, Prof. Braitstein shifted the focus from India to Tibet to explore how Buddhism became an integral part of the Tibetan identity. Through this exploration, she argued that Buddhism was not an entity with a self-consciously defined border. Whenever one wanted to construct an identity for the self, this constitution would yield the simultaneous making of the other. This mutual constitution of the self and the other reflects the defect of any exclusive narrative of Buddhism. Subsequently, Prof. Braitstein problematized several Self/Other distinctions presented in this exclusive narrative. The first distinction consisted in that of the monastic and the politic. According to this narrative, monastic communities should distance themselves from a secular life, especially from the socio-political one. Nevertheless, history suggested otherwise. Without the patronage and support of the royal family, Buddhists

would not be able to flourish in Tibet. Consequently, it was this joint force of monastics and politics that brought about the rise of Buddhism in Tibet. In Prof. Braitstein's terms, "when Buddhism became Tibetan, Tibet also became Buddhist."

The second distinction was a sectarian one. As Prof. Braitstein detailed, while Buddhist clergy would usually evoke the insider-outside binary to justify the legitimacy of their tradition, this line between insiders and outsiders was constantly blurred throughout the development of Buddhism. What epitomizes this trans-communal feature would be the story of Gampopa (1079-1153). Revered by the Buddhist community as one of the most eminent clerics, Gampopa was once the disciple of the renowned yogi Milarepa (1052-1135) from whom Gampopa learnt the Six Yogas of Naropa. This story of a Yogic master and his Buddhist student indicated not only the co-existence of Buddhism and the Yogic tradition but also the mutual influence between the two. Instead of being separated and demarcated from the other, Buddhism is in fact interdependent of other religious traditions, like the Yogic one. To end her talk, Prof. Braitstein did not attempt to make an all-encompassing conclusion. Instead, she hoped that the aforementioned discussion could encourage the audience to think about these tensions inside Buddhism.