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“Buddhism and Orality”

A Talk by Dr. Caley Smith at McGill University

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On February 22th, 2018, Dr. Caley Smith from McGill’s School of Religious Studies (SRS) delivered a talk titled “Buddhism and Orality.” Currently working on the Vedic tradition, Dr. Smith investigated the role of orality in various religious traditions, especially Buddhism, in his talk. He explored how the oral tradition is not the Other of the writing tradition, but rather offers believers access to teachings articulated by ancient masters. Dr. Smith’s presentation is part of the “Buddha and the Other” lecture series organized by McGill’s Centre for Research on Religion (CREOR), SRS, and the Department of East Asian Studies (EAS). Students and professors from EAS, SRS, Department of Philosophy, and School of Computer Science, attended the talk.

To start his presentation, Dr. Smith first clarified the notion of orality. Usually, scholars speak of orality as the quality of the scriptures that are composed, preserved, and communicated through talking and memory. Therefore, scriptures in the oral tradition are considered not to be fused with writing. In the studies of literature, oral tradition becomes a discipline through the effort of Milman Parry (1902-1935) and his student Albert Lord (1912 -1991). As remarked by Dr. Smith, the oral tradition has long been juxtaposed with the writing tradition, further giving

rise to an erroneous assumption that scriptures in the oral tradition are simplistic and limited in complexity. Instead of perceiving the oral tradition as the Other to the writing tradition, Dr. Smith argued that oral textuality was not a primitive form of knowledge production. Quite to the contrary, oral textuality was produced by a industry-like process, which required the same amount of effort as the written textuality. As such, orality had its own tropes and culture.

Dr. Smith traced orality in several intellectual traditions in the world, represented by Plato's dialogues, Confucius's *Analects*, Indian epics, and Buddhist sutras. As widely seen in these traditions, orality provides participants a chance to communicate with the original speaker. Dr. Smith took the Vedic tradition as an exemplar to expound on the power of orality in transmitting knowledge and justifying authority. As detailed by Dr. Smith, when someone memorizes the scripture composed by ancient sages, this person not only has access to the sages' wisdom but also embodies the voice of the sage. In this manner, the chanters transform themselves, becoming one with the original speakers and ancestors of the tradition. In Dr. Smith's terms, if one knows and remembers the text, that person becomes part of the lineage. Dr. Smith therefore coined the term "compositional self" to depict how the self is envisaged as part of the voice and therefore can be transformed by oral textuality.

Dr. Smith identified a similar role of orality in Buddhism. For instance, the Buddha's first cousin and one of his principal disciples Ananda, has been widely recognized and respected by the early Buddhist community for the capacity of memorizing and reciting the Buddha's teaching. As noted by Dr. Smith, the notion of a compositional self could also be inferred in the Buddhist tradition. Through emulating and reciting the words of the Buddha, one could realize a self-transformation to become one with the Buddha's wisdom, further obtaining the legitimacy

of being part of the tradition. Gradually, the oral tradition offered Buddhist followers a method to form their lineage and communities. When viewed from this perspective, oral textuality and written textuality complement rather than oppose each other. Dr. Smith's talk will be followed by Prof. James Robson's lecture "Buddhism and Daoism in China" on March 15, 2018.