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A Lecture by Dr. Charles Li at UBC, March 14, 2018

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Reconstructing Ānanda's Grief in the Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra

A Lecture by Dr. Charles Li at UBC, March 14, 2018

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On March 14th, the Department of Asian Studies at the University of British Columbia hosted Dr. Charles Li to present his research on translations of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* sutra. Dr. Li recently received his doctorate from Cambridge University and is now a postdoctoral fellow at the University of British Columbia, with an expertise in Sanskrit studies and digital humanities.

Dr. Li's presentation focused on the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* sutra, known for telling the story of the Buddha's death. As a popular text, this sutra has been translated into many languages, but Dr. Li's interest lies in the early Sanskrit, Pali, Chinese, and Tibetan texts. Specifically, he is interested in the gaps and incongruencies between these versions and the ways that scholars and dictionary writers attempt to resolve and account for these differences.

Some of these issues arise when scholars reconstruct stories from sutras as historical events. In one example, Dr. Li mentioned how the cremation described in some accounts stands out to a contemporary

reader as strange: the body is placed in a casket of oil and covered with an iron lid. How might a cremation actually be performed? Dr. Li noted that this would not likely be a successful cremation if we read the sutra as a historical text. In another, Ānanda prepares a bed for the Buddha, and realizes the Buddha is preparing for death. Ānanda, according to different accounts, either flees or stands behind the bed he has prepared, and the Buddha asks where Ānanda has gone. Within the tradition, the Buddha is omniscient, and should know where Ānanda has gone. To a contemporary reader, this shows the Buddha's weakness and humanity. Even without reading the sutra as a historical event, there are still four different editions in four languages to reconcile, some that exist in fragments, and others that contradict each other.

To demonstrate how a scholar might approach gaps or contradictions in this sutra, Dr. Li turned to a section shared by all four texts; the disciple Ānanda grieves the death of the Buddha. He shared with the audience some strategies that earlier scholars used to account for the differences between texts, from examining shared narrative elements, to examining each word and its translation in succession. Further narrowing his focus, Dr. Li turned to the Pali word “*kapisīsa*,” an object that Ānanda leans on while crying. Earlier scholars have attempted to define it as “bedpost” or “monkey head.” In Dr. Li's opinion, these translations have been inadequate, and do not lend themselves to a better understanding of this element in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* sutra.

Dr. Li's presentation raised important questions for scholars of early Buddhist texts. How can we avoid reading our contemporary assumptions onto these ancient texts? How would searching for the original meanings of Sanskrit and Pali words help us better understand the content and context of sutras? What are the best strategies to compare the same sutras in different languages? Dr. Li's presentation also generated engaged discussion with his audience, many of whom had sugges-

tions for alternate translations of “*kapisīsa*”, other ancient Indian texts that may be of interest to scholars of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* sutra, and secondary scholarship on translating Sanskrit and Pali. Dr. Li’s work, addressing both fields of Sanskrit and early Buddhist studies, challenges scholars to think carefully about their translations and the way they read these early texts.