

Buddhist Studies in Canada

Simon Fraser University, British Columbia

Paul Crowe

At Simon Fraser University, regular faculty and lecturers who teach courses related to Asian culture and history are spread out across several departments including Humanities, Sociology and Anthropology, History, Archeology, World Literature, English, Communications, Political Science, and the School for International Studies. Over the past twenty years the David See-Chai Lam Centre for International Communication has also played a pivotal role in supporting Asia-related scholarship, conferences, and publication at SFU. While SFU supports a diverse range of scholarship on Asia-related topics, there is no single Asian Studies department that houses them, and presently there is no centre for the study of religious traditions.

The only avenue consistently open to students wishing to study Buddhism is through the Department of Humanities and its associated Asia-Canada program. The Department of Humanities brings together scholars of varied interests and disciplinary training and affiliations that share a common interest in exploring major questions in the humanist tradition, allowing students sustained critical engagement with “Great Texts.” Thus, courses on Buddhism are taught alongside those considering, for example, Art and Literature of the Italian Renaissance, Carolingian civilization, classical Greek mythology, continental philosophy, and cultural critique.

Recently the department introduced a *Certificate in Religious Studies*, which permits Humanities majors to add a concentration in that field of study. Each year a second-year Introduction to Religious Studies is offered and the syllabus includes the study of a Buddhist text. Students taking the Certificate are encouraged to study religion from an interdisciplinary perspective and are free to focus on Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Daoist or Literati (“Confucian”) traditions, or may take a broader thematic approach. While the Program draws on support from Humanities, History, Asia-Canada program and other departments, its location within the Department of Humanities means that considerable focus remains on textual study.

Presently I am the only full-time faculty member who teaches courses on Buddhism though we are very fortunate to have had consistent sessional support from Michael Newton who is also an ordained Zen Buddhist priest with the experience and background in the study of Buddhist literature. Both of us teach for the Humanities Department and its Asia-Canada program, and most years, at least one course with a Buddhist focus is offered.

Currently, the two principal Humanities courses in which Buddhist texts are studied are *HUM 204 Great Religious Texts: Asia* and *HUM 331 Studies in Asian Religions*. In the former, a mix of texts are included. And my practice has been to include four per term, allowing roughly three weeks with each text, and ample time in seminars for the twenty-four students to engage in lengthy and detailed analysis and discussion. The last time this course was offered, it included the *Diamond Sutra*, *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, the *Zhuangzi*, and the Ming dynasty Chinese folk novel *Seven Taoist Masters (Qizhen zhuan 七真傳)*.

In *HUM 331 Studies in Asian Religions*, my approach has been to provide a historical overview of major developments beginning in India, including two weeks on Vedic texts with a view to demonstrating some of the continuities and tensions between the pre-Buddhist forms of religion and the earliest teachings associated with the Buddha. We then look at the movement of Buddhism into China and consider its reception by the Chinese during the later Han period. Subsequent doctrinal developments that followed are examined through reading texts associated with Huayan, Tiantai, Pureland and Chan. A lecture portion of each seminar helps situate the texts and their compilers within their socio-political contexts taking care to emphasize the provisional and fundamentally heuristic nature of the “schools” approach.

Alternately, this third-year course takes a broader look at religion in a region with Buddhism, representing one feature of the landscape. This term, for example, students in Michael’s course titled “Influence of the Japanese Landscape” read a number of influential religious texts of Japan that have shaped the religious landscape locally, but with an influence beyond Japan. The field considered extends from Buddhism to Confucian, Shinto and New religious movements and to the “little traditions” of shamanism, various folk beliefs and practices, and martial arts.

The Department of Humanities also offers courses on “Great Cities” which can provide opportunities to examine the lives of Buddhists in a very specific location. The most recent example was a course titled *Kyoto-The Heart of Japan*. In this course, Buddhism was explored as part of the cultural fabric of the city in, for example art, architecture, drama, gardens and the tea ceremony.

Both of us worked on chapters for the forthcoming *Asian Religions in British Columbia* (Daniel L. Overmyer, Don Baker and Larry DeVries, eds., UBC Press) that involved extensive interview work. One result of this has been the development of a diverse network of community contacts that can enrich the textual work done in the classroom. We make efforts to combine textual and general historical work with the provision of opportunities for students to interact with practitioners, either through

invitations to speak at SFU or by taking students to Buddhist centres around the Lower Mainland. Thus, the texts students study in the classroom are linked to the daily lives of practitioners, whether they be ordained monks, nuns or priests or lay leaders in their respective institutions.

Another avenue open to students in their third or fourth undergraduate year is through special topics courses in which the student and a faculty member determine a research focus for the term. The student is assigned the task of producing a single substantial research paper that grows out of extended one on one discussions. The readings are taken from a Bibliography compiled by the student with direction and advice from the faculty member. The last project I supervised dealt with recent scholarship in Buddhist ethics, anchored by the work of Damien Keown and Peter Harvey. The student, who was from Thailand, wanted to explore the basis in the Theravadin traditions for active efforts directed at social justice, combined with a critique of modern consumer economics.

Beyond these courses, our Asia-Canada program includes introductions at the first and second year levels to Asian histories and cultures. Religion is dealt with as part of these comprehensive introductions. In ASC 200, discussion of Buddhism and religion can occur in the context of examining politics, medicine, art and literature.

SFU has a large number of students with an Asian heritage and, specifically from Taiwan and Hong Kong, and more recently, the People's Republic of China. This makes it possible at the third-year level to read Buddhist texts in both Chinese and English. Many students cannot read Chinese and rely on the English versions of texts, but this has presented opportunities for some very fruitful discussions around the question of translation. As students with differing language backgrounds read the texts, they have an opportunity to talk with each other about the varying ways in which the texts are understood. Students gain first-hand appreciation for the kind of challenges facing translators of classical texts.

We hope that with the continued high level of interest in these courses (they are chronically full), and support for the Certificate in Religious Studies, we may be able to develop Buddhist studies further at SFU as an important part of a developing program in the study of religions that may one day culminate in a major.

Other future possibilities may include interdisciplinary work with SFU faculty in Psychology and Education who are examining the potential of contemplative practice in clinical applications and in the area of educational psychology. These kinds of investigations are currently developing in other North American universities such as Brown University's *Contemplative Studies Initiative* and the multidisciplinary *New Science of Virtues* project

recently initiated at the University of Chicago. Consciousness research in the field of neuroscience has been ongoing through the Stanford School of Medicine's *Project Compassion* and at the W.M. Keck Laboratory for Functional Brain Imaging and Behavior at the University of Wisconsin-Madison under the direction by Richard J. Davidson.