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British Columbian Forest  
A talk by Luke Clossey and Karen Ferguson  
at Simon Fraser University

Liam Foster

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How do we tell Buddhist histories? The diversity of belief amongst Buddhists makes this question puzzling. On October 4th, 2019, Dr. Luke Clossey and Dr. Karen Ferguson of Simon Fraser University told the story of Tom West, better known now as the Venerable Ajahn Sona, from his time as a lay hermit to becoming the first Westerner to establish a forest monastery in North America. They may have found a solution in Ajahn Sona's story. Dr. Clossey, along with Dr. Ferguson, prefaced their talk by saying, "considering the laws of karma and rebirth, our looking only at Ajahn Sona's current life is like writing a biography of Karl Marx that considered only a single day of his life." They then continued to tell the current life, so far, of Ajahn Sona and the Birken Monastery he created with the help of others.

Dr. Ferguson noted how Ajahn Sona was first drawn to Buddhism, noting his early sublime forest experiences and later experimentation with solitude. Ajahn Sona encountered Buddhism in the late 1970s and early 1980s, joined a few Zen and Tibetan Buddhist communities, but ultimately decided that Theravāda Buddhism was the path for him. He left his wife, and his life, behind. Dr. Ferguson then painted the picture of the Birken Monastery's austere early days. She located the first Birken Monastery in the Coast Mountains near Pemberton, in a cluster of four unwinterized shacks right beside the Birkenhead River. Austerity was a key feature, both to the success and character of the Birken Monastery and to Ajahn Sona himself.



Figure 1. Dr. Karen Ferguson. Photo by Liam Foster. Reprinted with permission

Dr. Clossey located three other features, besides austerity, which contributed to the success of the Birken Monastery: *vinaya*, *mettā*, and *dāna*. Dr. Clossey argued that scholars of Buddhism in North America often see Theravadin monastic formalism as something too alien and too challenging to appeal to Westerners, but then asked why it did, and still does. Ajahn Sona noted: “freedom only comes from enormous discipline.” With these strict rules, the monks at Birken were quite dependent. Dr. Clossey quoted an interviewee as saying: “even if we brought

them bread and peanut butter, they couldn't put them together." The Birken Monastery's survival, then, as Drs. Clossey and Ferguson told us, was a result of the support they received. The monks were dependent on *dāna*—a Pali word related to the English "donation." They had stewards and many visitors, some local, and some from Thailand and Sri Lanka. People had many different reasons for donating, citing culture and the hope for good karma.



Figure 2. Dr. Luke Clossey. Photo by Liam Foster. Reprinted with permission

Dr. Clossey and Dr. Ferguson argued that success of a strict monastic code, in a North American forest, with a diverse background of supporters and visitors, shows that globalization and global changes are not just a Western, city phenomenon. Dr. Clossey calls the Birken Monastery an example of the "global countryside;" Thai Forest Buddhism found success in Canada.

Dr. Clossey located another explanation of the Monastery's success and survival in their devotion to *mettā* or goodwill. This Dr. Clossey illustrated with a story from Ajahn Sona's life as a lay hermit: During one of Ajahn Sona's trips uphill back from Mount Currie, there was a loose, aggressive, mentally unstable dog that lived at a logger's shack along the road. Ajahn Sona would walk with his bicycle between him and the dog's

probable attack vector, and cultivate protective *mettā*. He managed to walk past twice successfully, but the third time the dog charged with fangs bared. Neither the dog nor the monk saw the truck, which suddenly hit and killed the dog. Ajahn Sona calculated the odds of the truck striking the dog at that exact moment at one in six thousand.

In the telling of this story, Dr. Clossey provided insight into how to tell a Buddhist history. His telling of the story assumes no direct perspective: it allows the readers to use their own perspective to understand the story. Some listeners believe in Buddhism's full cosmology, some believe in a more secular and didactic Buddhism, and some listeners are just scholars interested in other people's beliefs. By leaving the causality out of the story, Dr. Clossey allowed for a more global and inclusive perspective, without surrendering the potential power of his subject's story.

Drs. Clossey and Ferguson concluded their talk by discussing that for this strict form of Buddhist monasticism to take root at the shack monastery, a group of widely diverse people had to intersect to help serve the monks. Dr. Clossey observed that this global interaction did not happen in a cosmopolitan centre, like Vancouver, but rather in the rural countryside of the Birken Valley. Thai and Sri Lankan Buddhists, non-Asian seekers, and rural neighbours alike, all found Birken to be a place of devotion worth supporting. Traditional Buddhism has moved to the West, and the countryside has globalized. Buddhist perspectives can illuminate global histories, and global perspectives can illuminate Buddhist histories. Dr. Clossey and Dr. Ferguson shed their light on the Birken Monastery.

The talk can be viewed here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qayn1l-mRWE&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qayn1l-mRWE&feature=emb_logo)

Dr. Karen Ferguson is a professor in the Urban Studies Program at Simon Fraser University. She teaches courses on urban planning and development, as well as urban inequality. She has written two books on African-American history.

Dr. Luke Clossey is an associate professor of History and director of the Global Asia Program at Simon Fraser University, where he gives courses on the global history of religion. He previously wrote on the expansion of Christianity into Asia.

Dr. Ferguson and Dr. Clossey are now collaborating on a new research project critically examining the expansion of Buddhism into Canada.