Buddhism in Canada  - an Oral History

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I. Introduction

The total number of Buddhists in Canada, according to the latest year for which Figures are available (2011) are 366,830\(^1\) and are primarily concentrated in four Provinces, in Central and Western Canada:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Buddhists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ontario</td>
<td>163,750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Columbia</td>
<td>90,620</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quebec</td>
<td>52,390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alberta</td>
<td>44,410</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chart I: Concentration of Buddhists in Canada in 2011 by Province

However, there were “more than 580 Canadian Buddhist temples, centres, associations, groups and resources” in Canada in 2012\(^2\), with Buddhist temples and communities in just about every major city in each of the ten provinces. What has impressed this writer is that even in the earliest phase, Statistics Canada showing the presence of Buddhists even in the Northwestern Territories close to the Arctic.

The latest Theravada centre, Atlantic Theravada Buddhist Cultural and Meditation Society, made up of Sri Lankans, Burmese and Thai practitioners, e.g., opened in Nov. 2015, is in Herring Cove, Halifax, Nova Scotia\(^3\), a small province in Eastern Canada where Buddhists have been sparse.

But, this flowering across Canada had small beginnings, the Buddhist population in Canada in 1901 being a mere 10,407.\(^4\) This paper is an attempt to show how Buddhism in Canada has grown out of those small beginnings, during the first phase, ending around the year 2000. While there are many angles from which the topic may be approached, I have chosen the one known as Oral

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\(^1\) Stats Can, 2011.

\(^2\) The Sumeru Guide to Canadian Buddhism, at <http://www.directory.sumeru-books.com/>. This is a website run by the long time Canadian Buddhist John Negru. See later for his role.


\(^4\) Beyer, 2006, 85.
History. And this is for the very good reason that I come to it on the basis of a participant observer (as will be seen), i.e., as one who has been in the trenches for over three decades since the eighties. But this is not to say that there isn’t much happening in Canadian Buddhism outside of me and after me, in the post 2000-era in particular. So while it may not be by any means a comprehensive study, and is only indicative of the developments, it has the benefit of details and inside stories that only a participant-observer can tell, and may not be found elsewhere.

While the first part of the paper is chronological, the rest is thematic.

II Buddhism as Religion of Inherited Buddhists

2.1 Beginnings in the West Coast

2.1.1 First Buddhists in North America

While Buddhism may be only a hundred years old in Canada (see later), the earliest presence of Buddhism in North America dates back to over a thousand years or more when, “history indicates that a group of Buddhist monks arrived in North America as early as 458 AD”. The group was led by Bhikshu Hwui [Hui] Shan (“Universal Compassion”) who had presented the Chinese Emperor with an account of their visit to a country called Fu-sang, identified with Mexico. While there had been controversy around the record, in 1885, an American scholar Edward Payson Vining was to write an 800 page tome under the title, “An Inglorious Columbus; or Evidence that Hwui Shan and a Party of Buddhist Monks from Afghanistan Discovered America in the Fifth C. AD”.

Some names of cities in Mexico with the prefix Hui (name of the lead monk) are given as Huetama, Huichol and Huizontla. Then there are the cities with the prefix Saka - Sacaton, Zakatlan, Zacatecas. The country name Guatemala is suggestive of a possible connection to ‘Gautama’ (Gautama+mala?), the clan name of Prince Siddhartha, the later Buddha. The term –mala (pronounced with long ‘a’ vowels as in the pronunciation of the country name) is derivable from Sanskrit mālā, meaning ‘garland’; this then gives us ‘Gautama-garland’. But –mala could also be a variation of māyā, as in Queen Maya, mother of the Prince. The people themselves have the name Maya, the “Maya

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5 Fields, 1981. 25-30. In this context, it is intriguing to read in relation to another South American country, namely, Peru, that “Similarities in ancient art and artifacts found in China and Peru have led some scholars to suggest an ancient link between the two cultures. Now a Chinese scientist will be undertaking genetic testing of remains of ancient Chinese people and Peruvians to determine whether South America was visited by Shang Dynasty people beginning around 1,000 BC” <http://www.ancient-origins.net/news-history-archaeology/scientist-explores-connection-between-china-and-peru-020153>, this, of course, showing only a Chinese connection pre-dating Buddhism.

6 It would be intriguing to wonder if Texas has any connection with ‘tecas’!
civilization developing in an area that encompasses southeastern Mexico, all of Guatemala and Belize, and the western portions of Honduras and El Salvador”7.

2.1.2 Chinese as Immigrant Labour in Canada

While the original landing of Chinese in Canada is unclear, “In 1788, Captain John Meare, according to his diary, took fifty Chinese artisans to help him build vessels for fur trade along the Northwest Canadian coast (British Columbia). In September of the same year, Captain Meare and his crew set sail and their whereabouts became unknown.”8

The next recorded presence comes to be with the arrival of Chinese imported labour to work on the Canadian Pacific Railway. “Although the Chinese came to the shore of North America long before 1858, this year is generally considered to mark the beginning of Chinese community in Canada”, referred to as Gam San (“Gold Mountain”) by the pioneers. Of course, they may not have been actively, or exclusively, Buddhist. More than likely theirs would have been ‘a religion standing on three legs’ (Tripod), the reference being to ‘three religions’ (San Jiao) - Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism.

2.1.3 Japanese as ‘Enemy Aliens’

The formal introduction of Buddhism in Canada came with the establishment of the first Church of the Jodo Shinshu (‘Pure Land’) school in 1905, in Richmond, British Columbia, the farthest Western Province in Canada. However, the origins of Japanese Buddhism in North America was in the US (1899), from where it branched out to Canada9, when the first Minister Rev. Senju, arrived with his wife Tomie Sasaki10. During WW II, the Japanese had come to be considered ‘enemy aliens’ and subjected to physical displacement, an historical injustice that the Government of Canada was to acknowledge and pay compensation for. The adoption of the term ‘Church’ (and ‘Minister’ and ‘Bishop’ (for the whole country) was an attempt to make themselves as acceptable as possible in a Christian country. But, moving from 918 Bathurst Street where the Toronto Buddhist Church had been since 1946, to a new location on

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7 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maya_civilization#Classic_period_—_250–900_AD>. For an overview, see also Usarski, 2016.

8 The information in this section is taken from <http://ccnc.ca/toronto/history/info/info.html> which provides an extensive history of the Chinese in Canada for over a century.


10 Watada, 1996.
Sheppard Avenue in North Toronto, around the new millennium, it was a treat for my eyes to see the label ‘Toronto Buddhist Temple’ on the brand new building, replacing ‘Toronto Buddhist Church’.

2.2 Beginnings in Central Canada: Toronto and Montreal

Despite the early beginnings in the Canadian West, the real growth of Buddhism in Canada came to be in Toronto in central Canada. Again the earliest to arrive on the scene was the Toronto Buddhist Church in 1946. It was a change in the Canadian immigration policy in 1967 that ushered in the growth of Buddhism, when immigration based in ethnicity came to be scrapped in favour of a policy based on a point system. But it was the Multicultural policy introduced by Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau that contributed to the dramatic rise in Buddhism in Canada (as also, of course, other religions). Policy announced in 1971, it came to be official policy in 1988. The following Chart shows the dramatic increase (see against 1991) following the new policy in 1988:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Pop.</th>
<th>±%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>51,955</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>163,415</td>
<td>+214.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>300,345</td>
<td>+83.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>366,830</td>
<td>+22.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chart II: Changes in Buddhist Immigration, 1981 to 2011

Among the first to make use of the new Canadian policy were the Chinese when the Sau Fu

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11 Indeed our family may have been among the first beneficiaries, our academic credentials earning points. I had completed my studies in 1967 under the Fulbright Scholarship (at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia and University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), earning a Master’s degree in Linguistics (Penn), writing a thesis, “Morphological Analysis of the Verb in Spoken Sinhala” (Sugunasiri, 1966). My wife Swarna, a graduate of Peradeniya, had been a High School Teacher in Sri Lanka. So it was for her to get her teacher training credentials prior to returning home that, in 1967, we decided to apply for immigration to Canada.

12 Source: Stats Can, 2011.
Temple was established in 1967 at 100 Southill Rd, Don Mills by Ven. Sing Hung Fa-Shih who had arrived from Hong Kong with his brother monk Ven. Shing Cheung Shih. Outside of Toronto, in Kinmount, the Dharma Centre of Canada had opened its doors, a year earlier in 1966, founded by Namgyal Rinpoche, ordained earlier in the Theravada tradition under the name of Ananda Bodhi Bhikkhu. Formerly Leslie George Dawson, born in Toronto to parents of Irish-Scottish descent, he could be considered the pioneering ‘Acquired Buddhist’ (AB), as in my characterization (see next) of those not born into Buddhism, as contrasted with ‘Inherited Buddhist’ (IB).

To explain the distinction, an AB is a first generation Buddhist who has left behind his/her received spiritual connection (primarily Christian and Jewish) and embraced Buddhism. An IB, by contrast is one who is born to Buddhist parents. However, an offspring of an Acquired Buddhist would be an Inherited Buddhist, since Buddhism has come to be inherited from the parents. By contrast, an offspring of an Inherited Buddhist, who may have either consciously disowned his/her Buddhism in coming to Canada, or let it not be known for fear of possible or perceived repercussion of being Buddhist in a Christian country, would be an Acquired Buddhist.

Perhaps the earliest Tibetan Centre was the Toronto Dharmadhatu, established by the Ven. Chogyam Trungpa while on a visit to Toronto in 1970, later moving his Headquarters from the US to Halifax, Nova Scotia. Ven. Karma Thinley Rinpoche’s group, Kampo Gangra Drubgyudling was another early Tibetan Centre. A later Temple was the Gaden Chöling (1981), headed by Zasep Tulku Rinpoche (at 637 Christie Street). The Zen Buddhist Temple at 46 Gwynne Avenue had been established in the late 1970’s by Samu Sunim, who had come from Montreal.

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13 Fa-shih is the equivalent of Mahanayaka ‘Great Chief’ in Pali, and ‘shih’ means ‘venerable’. For the life story of Sing-Hung Fa-shih, see Sugunasiri, 1984. While the writer’s intent was to include it in Sugunasiri (Ed.) 2008, giving the life stories of five early Teachers (see later), Ven. Sing Hung’s life story was kept out at his request.

14 Rinpoche, an honorific term in Tibetan Buddhism, literally means ‘precious one’, like ratna in Sanskrit, in relation to those recognized as reincarnated, older, respected, notable, learned and/or an accomplished. It is also used as an honorific for abbots of monasteries <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rinpoche>.

15 It has been my personal experience to see Buddhists, known to be Buddhists through active participation, wearing a cross when in the public sphere other than Buddhist.

16 See Sugunasiri, 2006, for details.

17 “Personal communication from Stanley Fefferman who was on the Board of Directors of Kampo Gangra at its incorporation.” <http://www.sumeru-books.com/buddhist-council-of-canada-the-definitive-history/>.

18 Sunim is a Korean term of respect for the ordained, used in relation to both male and female.
The earliest Sinhala Buddhist Theravada centre in Toronto was the Mahavihara (est. 1978), located at 3495 Kingston Road. The founder, Ven. Dr. Walpola Piyananda\textsuperscript{19}, moving back to Wash. DC, the Temple came to be in the hands of Bhantes Madawala Punnaji\textsuperscript{20} and Dhammika\textsuperscript{21}. Bhante Punnaji was to later move on to the West End Buddhist Temple (with the later addition of ‘Meditation Centre’) in Mississauga, along with Ven. Kulugammana Dhammavasa\textsuperscript{22} who had by now arrived from Sri Lanka, as Bhante Dhammika left the robes on his own accord\textsuperscript{23}.

Hoa Nghiem Temple at 1278 Gerrard St. East was the Vietnamese Temple that had come within the fold of the Buddhist Federation of Toronto (see later), even though the first Vietnamese Buddhist group in Toronto was Chan Nhu which had its beginnings in 1976\textsuperscript{24}. Indeed the 40-ft banner of the Buddha figure in the background on the stage set up for the first Wesak in 1981 (see fn. 23) was their contribution to the success of the event.

By 1988, there had come to be 87,370 Buddhists in Toronto, world Buddhism well represented: Burmese, Campucheian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Laotion, Punjabi, Sinhalese, Thai, Tibetan, Vietnamese and Anglo-Saxon\textsuperscript{25}.

The Soka Gakkai International (SGI) (literally, "Society for the Creation of Value") is a Buddhist outfit that works independent of the temples. Founded in 1930 in Japan, Soka Gakkai International (SGI) was founded on January 26, 1975. The organization's aim is to contribute to peace, culture and education based on the philosophy and ideals of Nichiren Buddhism\textsuperscript{26}.

\textsuperscript{19} See Toronto Mahavihara, \textit{Toronto Buddhist}, Jan 2016, for a detailed continuing history.

\textsuperscript{20} For the life stories of Bhante Punnaji, Kwang Ok Sunim (see later), Samu Sunim, Tsunoda Sensei (of the Japanese Buddhist Church) and Zasep Tulku Rinpoche, see Sugunasiri (Ed.), 2008.

\textsuperscript{21} Bhantes Dhammika and Punnaji can be seen in the photo of the first Wesak held in 1981. For a photo of that first Wesak, see https://www.google.ca/search?q=sugunasiri+pictures&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwisqIjRm9_NAhVL0MKHasUAq0QsAQIHQ&biw=1262&bih=631#imgrc=5hQVVgB2r0ldfM%3A.

\textsuperscript{22} While Bhante Punnaji now resides in Malaysia, walking into the shoes left vacant by the passing away of Ven. K Dhammananda, Bhante Dhammavasa heads the Temple.

\textsuperscript{23} Currently, Ven. Ahangama Rathanasiri heads the Mahavihara, with Ven. Udupihille Wimalabuddhi running the Sunday school program for children.

\textsuperscript{24} McLellan, 1999, 107. See also Soucy, 2014, for the life story of Thich Nu Pho Tinh, a Canadian educated Vietnamese Bhikkhuni (‘nu’ in Thich nu, being the feminine form).

\textsuperscript{25} Sugunasiri, 1989.

\textsuperscript{26} <http://www.sgi.org/resources/introductory-materials/brief-history-of-sgi.html>.
While Toronto continued to be the Centre of Buddhism during this early phase, English- and French-speaking Montreal in Quebec was also developing as a Centre\(^\text{27}\), the Temple bouddhiste tibetaine, founded by Geshe-la Khenrab\(^\text{28}\) being among the earliest. One of the early lay leaders is Louis Cormier\(^\text{29}\), an Acquired Buddhist, one of Geshe-la ’s first Canadian students. Another early presence was the Vietnamese temple Tam Bao, Vietnam having been under French colonial rule until 1954. The Montreal Zen Center was established in 1975 by Philip Kapleau, the creator of the Rochester Zen Center in 1966\(^\text{30}\). It “has a lay community, with members who come from all walks of life and are active in our modern society. Center members are encouraged to see their families, work, and friends as the focus of their spiritual practice, coming to the Center to be refreshed and to gain encouragement and support”\(^\text{31}\). Albert Low, an immigrant from South Africa who came in 1979 with his wife, was to become its Spiritual Director in 1985, receiving his “full transmission” from the Founder, and becoming a Zen Master\(^\text{32}\). Unlike the several temples founded by IB’s, the Zen Centre founded by an AB then shows a change in the direction of what may be called ‘Secular Dhamma’.

Vancouver in British Columbia was also beginning to be a Centre, primarily due to Chinese immigration. This was as also Toronto\(^\text{33}\) particularly with the impending return of Hong Kong by the British by the end of the century.

### III  Inherited Buddhist Unity and Particularity


\(^{28}\) Geshe, though meaning "virtuous friend", the translation of Skt. kalyāṇamitra, is a Tibetan Buddhist academic degree for monks and nuns, and the equivalent of a PhD. The title is earned following a strict course of studies, and a defense in a public debate on the Dhamma, under the eye of an examining board. Sometimes an honorific -la is added, as in Geshe-la, as -ji in Hindi (as e.g., Gandhi-ji). See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geshe>. Geshema is the female equivalent, but established only recently <http://www.lionsroar.com/nuns-take-exams-toward-geshema-degrees/>.

\(^{29}\) For his contributions, see Peressini, 2016.


\(^{32}\) See Peressini, 2010 for a write up.

\(^{33}\) Out of 87,370 in Toronto, e.g., 63,170 were Chinese.
If the above is a brief history of the early seeds of Buddhism, of central Canada in particular, let us now explore the beginning phase of unity among the diverse Inherited Buddhist (i.e., immigrant) communities. Writing a chapter on my work in Canadian Buddhism, Professors Hori and McLellan write, “Sugunasiri helped shape the development of Buddhism in this country. .. His life is a prism through which the history of Buddhism in Canada comes into focus…” So let us then see what beams of the prism we can discover.

3.1 An Initial Personal Involvement

My initial involvement in the Canadian Buddhist scene begins with the Toronto Mahavihara, when as one of two Co-Vice Presidents, I organized Wesak in the late 1970’s. This, however, was not at the temple, but at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, in downtown Toronto, where I had earned my doctorate in 1978.

At a time when Pali Buddhist scholarship was a rare commodity, I had invited Prof. Bruce Matthews (then at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and a former Commonwealth scholar in Buddhist Civilization at the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya (1970-71), to make a Dhamma presentation. A Christian Minister, he was a Pali and Buddhist scholar who had done his studies in Sri Lanka. While there were some questions as to the wisdom of inviting a Christian Minister to be lead speaker at the most significant Buddhist ceremony, the congregation left no doubts as to their verdict when it broke into a loud saadhu saadhu at the end of the talk.

Holding Wesak at the same OISE premises next year, the chief guest was Ven. Bhante Gunaratana, from the Washington Vihara. The event included the observation of the Eight Training Principles (atasil),

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35 This could have been in 1979 or 1980.

36 Currently Dean of Arts and C.B. Lumsden Professor of Comparative Religion at Arcadia University, Nova Scotia, he is Editor of Buddhism in Canada. See Matthews (Ed.), 2006.

to give the literal translation of *sikkhāpada*\(^\text{38}\), by elders, parents and children. The food brought in by the community, for the almsgiving, was enjoyed by one and all!

### 3.2 Organizational Unity

In its life of 2600 years, Buddhism had come to grow into different schools, branches, etc. along with doctrinal differences, in different regions of Asia (South and Southeast Asia – e.g., Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Kampuchea, Laos) and East Asia (China, Japan, Korea, Tibet, etc.). The happy marker of the early phase of Buddhism in Canada beginning in 1980 was that all the Buddhists, of all schools and varieties present in Toronto at the time, both Inherited and Acquired, came to work together in an organizational unity. This was a unique experience as perhaps in no other country, as Colonel Olcott had once envisaged over a century ago in Sri Lanka\(^\text{39}\) – respecting the differences, but working together, i.e., unity in diversity. I had by now joined the World Conference on Religion for Peace (WCRP), a Japanese outfit now with a Chapter in Canada. At the WCRP, I was to meet Rev. Orai Fujikawa, Senior Minister of the Toronto Buddhist Church. Active within the WCRP was the Canadian Council of Churches whose members were interested in organizing an Interfaith service. Providing the leadership was the United Church of Canada, a liberal Christian community. Interfaith relations were so critical to its mandate that it actually had a paid position of Interfaith Officer, a position held by Dr. John Berthrong\(^\text{40}\). And so the two of us, Fujikawa Sensei\(^\text{41}\) and I were invited to explore the possibility of a Buddhist participation at the Interfaith service. A community meeting was held in a room at OISE (where I was by now a Project Officer), at 252 Bloor Street West, a mere block away from the WCRP head office at 10 Madison Ave. ‘Interfaith Service’ was a new idea certainly to all of us, but it was a pleasant surprise to see a group of nearly 75 individuals in attendance. Among the Sangha participants were, in addition to Fujikawa Sensei, Bishop Tsunoda, Sing Hung Fa-shih, Shing Cheung Shih and Bhante Dhammika. Among the lay leaders were Darshan

\(^{38}\) This is a translation as introduced by the Ven. Bhante Punnaji, later resident of the Mahavihara replacing ‘Precepts’ with theistic connotations.


\(^{40}\) Currently Associate Dean, Boston School of Theology, USA, his research area is on Chinese Confucianism.

\(^{41}\) “Sensei … is a Japanese honorific and word that is literally translated as "person born before another". In general usage, it is used, with proper form, after a person's name, and means "teacher" <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sensei>.
Chaudhary of the Ambedkar Mission, Khan Lekim of the Vietnamese community and Peter Volz of the Shambala Centre. The Sinhala community was well represented. The decision to attend the Interfaith Service was unanimous!

Following the Interfaith service, at the Bloor United Church, it was the decision of the Buddhist group to continue to meet. Thus was born the Toronto Buddhist Federation (later Buddhist Federation of Toronto), registered under the Corporations Act, and I was elected the Founding Coordinator.

It was to hold the first WESAK in May 1981, the name Wesak introduced by the writer. Buoyed by the camaraderie developed in making the first WESAK a roaring success, with a 1000 attending (as reported in the Toronto Sun with a picture (see fn. 21)), the model was to be followed for the next 13 years. At the invitation of the writer, Bhante Punnaji of the Toronto Mahavihara was to write a ‘Unity Song’, titled ‘Roll the Dhamma Wheel’ and sung by Toronto musician, Brent Titcombe, to his own guitar music, with the audience participating in the chorus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BUDDHIST UNITY SONG “Roll the Dharma Wheel”</th>
<th>Words by: Bhante Punnaji Sung by: Brent Titcombe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buddha with his chief disciple Sariputra Great And all the saints who came thereafter Rolled the Dharma Wheel. So let's roll the Wheel Beat the Deathless Drum. Let us all Buddhists unite To roll the Dharma Wheel.</td>
<td>Ethnic pride and prejudice Is what divides Buddhists. Rituals and Dogmas, too Divide Buddhists to sects. True Buddhists give up Pride and prejudice. Let us all Buddhists unite To roll the Dharma Wheel!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHORUS</strong>:</td>
<td><strong>CHORUS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roll along, Roll along Roll the Dharma Wheel.</td>
<td>The Noble Life that Buddha taught Is free from greed and hate If we live this life enlightened The world will live in peace. So let's roll the Dharma Wheel Beat the Deathless Drum.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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42 Bloor is the main street dividing the old City of Toronto north and south. The road running east-west, it is also the subway line.

43 For the Program highlights, see <http://buddhistcouncil.ca/activities.html>.

44 See Sugunasiri, 2016 for more details. For a photo of that first Wesak, see fn. 19.

45 <http://buddhistcouncil.ca/activities.html>.
Let us all Buddhists unite
To roll the Dharma Wheel!

(continued >)

Let us all Buddhists unite
To roll the Dharma Wheel!

In the hope of creating an impact on the political establishment, the Mayor of Toronto Art Eggleton was invited to the next Wesak celebration, the Catholic Mayor coming with his wife. Attending by invitation the following year was Ontario Minister of Citizenship and Culture, Bruce McCaffrey, patiently waiting for the delayed opening, punctuality being a nice little word for the Buddhists, to be heard but ignored! Over the years, Wesak was to be held at different venues – from High Schools to University halls to public arenas. The Buddhist Federation of Toronto continued to meet at the Toronto Buddhist Church at 918 Bathurst. Invited by the member temples associated with the BFT, I was one busy city trotter, driving from one end of the city to the other, attending one or another event.

A good social worker is said to be one who replaces herself/himself. So, finding that there was too much of an exclusive dependence on me, I was to step down after about 3 years, encouraging more active, community participation. John Negru stepped in as Coordinator for three years, before passing on the baton to Dr Vansen Lee, a medical doctor who has been an active supporter of Buddhist unity.

3.2.2 Buddhist Council of Canada

Hori & McLellan (2010, 378) note my input into government as well: “During the 1980’s and the 90’s, he became the voice for Buddhism on numerous provincial federal government bodies dealing with interfaith and multicultural issues”. The introduction to all this was my appointment, by Order-in Council, to the Ontario Advisory Council on Multiculturalism and Citizenship, in 1983.

By 1985, a challenge for the religious communities of Canada was thrown by the Canadian Radio and Telecommunication Commission (CRTC) – to set up an Interfaith TV Network. As a member of the Interfaith Sub-Committee of the Council to which the CRTC challenge had been sent for action, I had drawn up a plan to invite the Religious Communities to consider the challenge, which would eventually

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46 For John Negru’s own role in the growth of Buddhist unity, and a list of others activities during his time as Coordinator, see Yonten, 2010.
result in Vision TV\textsuperscript{47}. Stanley Fefferman, Professor of English at York University, and a member of Dharmadhatu, had come to be the Coordinator of the Buddhist Federation of Toronto by now. The call by the CRTC was for a National level media outlet, but the Buddhist Federation of Toronto was a local organization. Recognizing the need to have a Buddhist voice at the national level, at an informal meeting held at the Dharmadhatu, attended by Fefferman, Negru and Sugunasiri, a decision was made to form a Canada-wide organization. The transition was smooth when the BFT was legally changed to Buddhist Council of Canada (1985), and Prof. Fefferman became its first President. The Toronto collectivity now came to be the ‘Toronto Chapter’ of the BCC, Negru acting as Toronto Coordinator\textsuperscript{48}.

The Objectives of BCC continued to be the same:

1. To promote the Buddhadhamma according to the traditions of all the Schools of Buddhism;
2. To promote co-operation among Buddhist Communities in Canada and elsewhere.

Fefferman joined other interfaith members – Christian, Hindu, Muslim and Zoroastrian – traveling around the country to convince Canada of the need for a multifaith TV station. The goal of the mission was accomplished with Vision TV going on air. Fefferman subsequently moved on, with Sugunasiri invited to step into the President role. With the new President traveling across the country, the next few years saw several chapters coming into existence in locations such as Ajax, Aurora, Edmonton, Halifax, Montreal, Ottawa, St. John’s, Vancouver, Victoria and Windsor. It also resulted in the first (and only) Congress of the Buddhist Council of Canada to be held in Toronto (1989), with the participation of the following delegates:

- Dr. Stephen Aung (Edmonton)
- Mr. Louis Cormier (Montreal)
- Dr. Vansen Lee (Toronto)
- Prof. Lakshman Marasingha (Windsor)
- Ms. Kristin Penn (Vancouver)
- Mr. Mongkhol Salyajivin (Aurora)
- Rev. Jhampa Shaneman (Victoria)

\textsuperscript{47} See posting by John Negru, 2011.

\textsuperscript{48} See fn. 46.
Mr. Evans Silva (Ottawa)
Mr. Peter Volz (Halifax)" 49.

The meetings were held at the official address of BCC/BFT which had now came to be at 1330 Bloor Street West [Hong Fa Temple], courtesy Sing Hung Fa-shi of the Cham Shan Temple, and with much facilitation by an elder, Mr. Chin An Lee, an Engineer, and Mr. Lok Ho, both fluent in English.

Under the energetic editorship of Glen Mullin, a *BCC Journal* also flourished during this period50.”

Soon the BCC leadership reins were to go to the hands of Rev. Jhampa Shaneman, an Acquired Buddhist with his centre in Victoria, British Columbia51.

### 3.3 Unity in Hibernation

But maintaining a national level interest by the Buddhists came to be increasingly challenging as the 1980’s came to a close. The Buddhist presence in Canada had come to be increasingly different from when the Buddhists of Toronto first came together in 1981:

- Temple membership was getting larger.
- Temple financial base was getting stronger.
- More Teachers had immigrated from their home countries to take leadership roles in their Canadian communities.
- More members of the Temple communities came to be English-speaking.

An early basis for the of enthusiasm of Buddhists to come together was certainly the novelty of meeting face to face the Buddhists of other countries and other schools of Buddhism. But, over time, the novelty

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49 Attending as well was a Burmese Chinese Buddhist, from Newfoundland, whose name now escapes me, on his way to ordination. For some reason, he left with me a typed up copy of the Vinaya Pitaka, for both Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis, the copy still with me.

50 For copies of the program of the BCC Congress and for the first two issues of the journal, 1987 and 1988, visit <http://www.sumeru-books.com/ephemera/>. For a write-up on Glenn Mullin, please see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glenn_H._Mullin>.

51 For his bio, please visit http://www.buddhistastrology.com/sbio.html.
had faded off. Also, not only were the Buddhists no longer unsung, unrecognized and unrespected by the wider Canadian community, but were also not unwealthy. This meant that they did not need any other Buddhist community to survive either. As individual communities became stronger, with a regular calendar of liturgical events, the incentive to hold an annual joint Wesak celebration, as the BCC had done, became less relevant.

As if in response to the new reality, the Buddhist Federation of Toronto came to be re-formed as a lay organization to address local concerns and new community development initiatives, with Michael Kerr as Coordinator and with a change of name to Buddhist Communities of Greater Toronto. The name itself, of course, should be indicative of the cracks appearing in Buddhist unity. If earlier the critical term was ‘Federation’, now the emphasis being on the ‘Communities’.

“Thus the Buddhist Council of Canada can be said to have entered a period of hibernation, with Sugunasiri continuing to act as de jure President52, receiving communication from the government as well as other institutions53.

### 3.4 Unity in Particularity

We have used the label ‘particularity’ in preference to ‘particularism’, not only because it well rhymes with ‘unity’, which, of course, is a good reason for a poet and novelist like me54. But it is because of the negative connotation associable with the more common term ‘particularism’, the association linked to the suffix –ism. This hit me when I realized how the dominant religion of Europe is called ‘Christianity’, while most if not all other religions have been tagged with –ism, as e.g., Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. While the two suffixes –ism and –ity per se may not have any such negative or positive connotations, as e.g., in ‘individualism’ and ‘individuality’, the term particularism, may, by association, connote something


53 The ‘other institutions’ included Penitentiaries where there were now beginning to be Buddhists, Prison statistics for the year 2011 indicating that 2% of inmates in Canada’s federal prison system are Buddhist. See <https://enwiki.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism_in_Canada>. I was also responding to the Media. The official address of the Buddhist Council of Canada for the next three decades continued to be the Sugunasiri residence in Forest Hill, with the address ‘3 Ardmore Road, Toronto, Ontario M5P 1V4, and phone number appearing online.

54 My novel, Untouchable Woman’s Odyssey (available on Kindle, and at Vijita Yapa Books, Sri Lanka), has been hailed as “an extraordinary novel” (Prof. Chelva Kanaganayakam of the University of Toronto). For some reviews, please see Beck, 2014. But my beginnings were in poetry: Faces of Galle Face Green, (1996); Celestial Conversations (2006); Obama-ji (2009) <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/25924>. And I am also the author of two collections of short stories in Sinhala: Yamayudde ‘Life Struggle’ and Amanayo ‘Idiots’ (1960’s).
negative about it, particularly in the context of our discussion. Above we have seen ‘unity’ as the ideal, when our differences, i.e., particularities, were put behind, forging a unity. But now it is a reverse process that was emerging on the Canadian Buddhist scene.

However, as I shall argue, such particularity is not necessarily a bad thing, since part of the strength of Buddhism in Canada is the very growth of the individual Buddhist communities, promoted by a particularity. Now to what extent such a particularity may be contributive to an increase in Thirst (tanha) and Clinging (upadana) in the case of a given individual of a given community, including the Sangha members, and detrimental to one’s liberation, would, of course, be a matter of personal choice.

3.4.1 Sangha Council of Southern Ontario and the Peace March

It was in silent resentment, I will admit, that I attended the ‘Peace March’ organized by the Sangha Council of Southern Ontario55, under the leadership of Yangil Sunim of Nine Mountains Zen Gate (Dae Kak Sa)56 at the Nathan Phillips Square where we had held our first Wesak in 1981. But my resentment was not for personal reasons57, for I was no longer an office bearer in any Buddhist organization. It was that, held in June, in warmer weather conditions than May when Wesak is traditionally held, his ‘Peace March’ was sapping away the energy from Wesak. ‘Peace March’ itself was a contrived event, with no specific significance associated with the month, although, of course, peace itself is always associated with Buddhism. Thus the event could be seen as a collective effort on the part of the Sangha to regain a public leadership lost to the laity, better, never had had, in the Canadian context, leadership in the home country, of course, being in the hands of the Sangha. But, regardless of the underlying factors, the event did inject energy into a dying unity, if only temporarily. However, despite the reasonable attendance, the event not sustained, there came to be another hiatus in Buddhist unity.

3.4.2 Unity Wesak

It was two decades or so later, in 2012 when Buddhist unity got a shot in the arm. And that was when a ‘Unity Wesak’ came to be held at the Mel Lastman Square in North Toronto, bringing in the diverse Buddhist communities together, though, of course, not “for the first time in this great city of ours” as

55 This was in the early 1990’s.

56 See <http://awakenedmeditationcentre.com/?page_id=75 for some background>.

57 In fact, when Nalanda College of Buddhist Studies was set up (est. 2000), the Sunim would bring his new disciples to be enrolled at the College to learn English.
claimed. This was under the vibrant leadership of another Sangha member, Ven. Bhante Saranapala, of the West End Buddhist Temple and Meditation Centre in Mississauga. If it had an attendance of about 1700, the success was to no small measure thanks to the indefatigable role played by Mr. Karunarathna Paranavitana, the Consul General for Sri Lanka in Toronto. I was happy to be there to witness the event, with a desk assigned to the Buddhist Council of Canada.

Two years later (2014), the Buddhists were to come together even in larger numbers – estimated to be 3000, this time at the Celebration Square at the City Centre in Mississauga, the western suburb of Toronto. The leading hand again was Bhante Saranapala, and organized by “the three largest temples in Mississauga … the Fo Guang Shan Temple of Toronto (at Mill Creek Rd.), the Phap Van Buddhist Temple at Trader’s Blvd. and the West-End Buddhist Temple at Cawthra Rd” with “an additional 27 temples and societies from around the GTA”.

If particularity had killed Buddhist unity in the 1990’s, it had served as a condition for each of the individual branches of the tree of Canadian Buddhism to cultivate its potential, to varying degrees, of course. If in the early phase, Buddhists came together under the single umbrella of the Buddhist Federation of Toronto and the Buddhist Council of Canada, it was due to their weakness (as above). But now, by contrast, it is their strength that brought them together, the several stalls set up by individual temples and groups, happily displaying their publications and leaders, speaking to their growth.

3.4.3 A Political Consciousness

If the internal reason for Buddhist unity may be indicative of tolerance and mutual respect in practice, the external reason may be to show strength in numbers. In the context of Canada to which Buddhism is new and is little known to the politicians in particular, one way to benefit politically from the increasing numbers is to draw their attention to the reality. While this may be by way of educating them about Buddhism itself, how the numbers are translatable into votes is to be not lost on them! This is a strategy I myself had adopted in inviting the Mayor and the Provincial Minister to our first Wesak celebrations, inviting them to address the crowd as well.

58 <http://www.torontoslcg.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=199:unity-vesak-2012-draw-large-crowds-at-mel-lastman-square-in-toronto&catid=43:cg&Itemid=120>. While, of course, it is true that the event “brought together a coterie of Maha Sangha from across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA)”, it is a blatant misrepresentation to claim that it was “for the first time in this great city of ours.” The first time, it may be remembered, was in 1981. See above.

59 Personal knowledge.

So another healthy development associated with Wesak 2014 was the involvement of the political establishment. Walking in the processional at the Mississauga event was local MPP Dipika Damerla, of the Ontario Legislature. A Canadian of Indian origin, she would later make a speech in the Parliament saying how surprised, and proud, she was to discover a religion of her country in her very backyard of Mississauga. If her participation was symbolic of a Buddhist sensibility planted within the Canadian political consciousness, counting the votes could surely have been not far behind.

Subsequent to Wesak, MPP Damerla was to organize a Buddhism Heritage Day at the Ontario Legislature on Oct. 10, 2014, in cooperation with Bhante (now Dr., with a PhD from University of Toronto), attended by about 150 Buddhists. BCC, now revived (see later), invited to participate, I would outline the history of Buddhism in Toronto, ending it with a poem written in honour of the MPP. I also took the occasion to congratulate Bhante Saranapala for his outstanding organizational skills, as I had also congratulated him publicly at a Wesak event at Queen's Park upon earning his doctorate.

3.5 A Continuing Presence of Buddhist Council of Canada

It was noted how the Buddhist Council of Canada had entered a period of hibernation, with Sugunasiri continuing to act as de jure President. We may now add the next line in Negru’s posting: “And so it was until the Buddhist Council of Canada was revived in 2010, at the initiative of three people: Sugunasiri as President, Dr Veronique Ramses as Vice President, and Bryan Levman as Secretary.”

In addition to the two earlier objectives, now there came to be added three more:

3. To promote social harmony, economic prosperity, political stability and cultural vibrancy of Canada.
4. To promote the personal and social well-being & happiness of all Canadians.
5. To contribute towards a multicultural Canada through the application of Buddhist Principles.

The first activity engaged in by the newly emergent Council was to set up a Torana – basically, the face of the Buddha printed on an eight by four poster, at the South lawn at Queen’s Park in May.

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61 Dr. Veronique Ramses, now a Professor at York University, was one of the earliest Acquired Buddhists I was to meet, she being a regular at the Trinity Seminars I had organized in the 1990’s. Later on she was to be on the Board of Directors of Nalanda College of Buddhist Studies, and also served on the Nalanda Faculty, teaching Meditation. Most recently, she was to be, at my behest, Producer of the 13-part series on Buddhism on Omni TV, hosted by Glen Choi (now with a PhD from University of Ottawa), formerly a student at Nalanda, and later Administrative Secretary.

62 Dr. Bryan Levman’s doctoral thesis (Religious Studies, University of Toronto) was on the language used by the Buddha. For a brief CV, see http://buddhistcouncil.ca/bios.html. Currently, he also teaches Advanced level Pali at the University of Toronto.
2011. This was in celebration of WESAK, commemorating the ushering in of the 2600th year of the Buddha’s Enlightenment. This was a continuation of an initiative taken in 2005 to celebrate Wesak on this same public grounds, for the first time anywhere in Canada, this under the auspices of Nalanda College of Buddhist Studies, celebrating ‘100 years of Buddhism in Canada’. The event was marked by raising a specially designed archway, on 12-ft pole, displaying the Buddhist flag of the five colours (blue, yellow, red, white and orange), with ‘Wesak’ written across the Canadian national symbol of the Maple leaf, with the words ‘Buddha’s Birthday, Enlightenment & Parinibbana’ written below.

Another religious activity organized as part of 100 years of Buddhism in Canada was holding a Paritta (pirit) chanting ceremony, again at the auditorium of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, putting up an octagonal Mandapaya. It was another first, and one and only time a Paritta ceremony was held in the public arena. It was with the participation of 9 Theravada monks: Venerables Ahangama Rathanasiri and Udupihille Wimalabuddhi of the Toronto Mahavihara; Dhammarama, Buddhapanada, Vijitha, Kirinde Gnanaransi, Pannasara and Hemalankara of the Mississauga Buddhist Meditation Centre; and Ashin Kawwwida of the Burmese Mahadhammika Vihara.

While plans were now afoot to have WESAK 2013 celebrated on the Legislature grounds for seven days, marking the seven weeks spent by the Buddha under the Bodhi Tree upon Enlightenment, it is still waiting to materialize.

Another activity of BCC was Windows to Buddhism in the Academy, a display of books on Buddhism available at Robarts Library, University of Toronto, on the main floor, July-August 2013.

IV. Planting the Seeds in the Wider Community

63 “The Buddhist flag is a modern creation. It was jointly designed by Mr J.R. de Silva and Colonel Henry S. Olcott to mark the revival of Buddhism in Ceylon in 1880. It was accepted as the International Buddhist Flag by the 1952 World Buddhist Congress…. Colonel Olcott designed a flag from the six colours of the aura that he believed shone around the head of the Buddha after His Enlightenment.” The flag was designed in consultation with Ven. Sri Sumangala, Olcott’s earliest and primary contact, as well <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/history/b_flag.htm>.

64 For the historic photo of a representative sample of people at the event against the background of the flag, see front cover of Nalanda College of Buddhist Studies, 2005, Commemorative Souvenir, 100 years of Buddhism in Canada (kanadaratthe buddhasasanassa vassasatam), May 20-31, 2005, reproduced in Sugunasiri, 2016.

65 See Nalanda College of Buddhist Studies, 2005, Commemorative Souvenir, 100 years of Buddhism in Canada (kanadaratthe buddhasasanassa vassasatam), May 20-31, 2005, p. 31.

66 For some photos, see <http://buddhistcouncil.ca/>. 
If the presence of Buddhism came to be nurtured internally in relation to the varieties of Inherited Buddhists, a significant other step was to bring the presence of Buddhism to the wider Canadian community, i.e., to plant the seeds. Here, then, is a short list of some of these initiatives:

5.1 Buddhism on Wheels
5.2 Interfaith Relations
5.3 Input to Government
5.4 Buddhism in the Media
5.5 Seminars and Courses

We provide only a few highlights, just to be indicative.

4.1 Buddhism on Wheels

Buddhism was, except for practitioners and scholars, of course, a total stranger for the Canadian public. It was to widen the audience, then, that two initiatives were thought up: ‘Meet the Teachers’ and ‘Buddhism on Wheels’. Held at the Friends House at 60 Lowther Ave. in downtown Toronto, among the teachers featured under ‘Meet the Teachers’ program were Samu Sunim and Bhante Punnaji, most other teachers having no English language skill.

The idea behind ‘Buddhism on Wheels’ was to keep the temples open to the public during the month of May, to allow for a less formal context for access to the temples, and meet the average Buddhist. All these were in turn was expected to encourage the wider non-Buddhist community of Canadians to be supportive of the traditional temples, informally or formally.

4.2 Interfaith Relations

My first contribution towards interfaith understanding was a chapter on ‘Buddhism’, in Religions of the Sub-Continent of India (Sugunasiri, 1979), published by the Toronto Board of Education. But Interfaith Relations being a thrust of the Buddhist Federation of Toronto and BCC, I was to follow up on the relations built by Prof. Fefferman in the context of promoting the interfaith TV, and work with Dr. John Berthrong, Interfaith Officer of the United Church of Canada, and Dr. Paul Newman, his successor.

If Multiculturalism encouraged immigration and equality, one of the unintended social outcomes was an increasing hostility to Christianity, or at least an attempt to get Christianity off the historical religious

67 This an outfit set up by the Christian Quakers. See <https://www.yelp.ca/biz/friends-house-toronto-2>.
pedestal of the country, and this by minorities who never ceased to push their own religion. They had come to be vociferous in their objection to lights being put up for Christmas at the Ontario Legislature, as had been all these many years. Incensed, I was to go on Vision TV, openly identifying myself as a Buddhist, to plead the case for Christians, inviting them to “light up from the roof tops for baby Jesus”, this to the pleasant surprise of the Producer, Rita Deverell, who commented that it would be only a Buddhist who would be that large-hearted! Invited to read at the Toronto International Harbourfront Reading Series upon the publication of my first poetry collection, *Faces of Galle Face Green* (see fn. 54), I would read the same poem68, inviting the audience to join in.

Working with Rabbi Marmur, of the Holy Blossom Temple, in my Jewish neighbourhood of Forest Hill69, I was to take an initiative to establish Buddhist-Jewish Dialogue. By now, many a Jew in North America, and Canada, had become Buddhist, even calling themselves Ju-Bu. A Rabbi participating made no bones about why he was attending it: to learn why Jews were getting to be attracted to Buddhism, how to stop the exodus! Another interfaith activity I was to participate in was out of Canada - as Exec. Member of NAIN – North American Interfaith Network, attending meetings and making presentations at conferences including one in association of the World Parliament of Religions (WPR) held in 1993, in Chicago, USA, to commemorate the first WPR held in the same city in 1893 where Anagarika Dharmapala of Sri Lanka made his famous speech, “The World’s Debt to Buddha”70.

A most recent (2013) interfaith participation was the invitation to a meeting sponsored by the Tony Blair Foundation, an initiative of the former British Prime Minister, Anglican now converted to Catholicism, in partnerships with the Canadian Belinda Stronach Foundation71 in “advancement of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)”. My comments at the meeting was reported as follows: "‘Religion is a matter of the heart. So is human suffering, in addition to being related to material needs. So this valuable initiative is an attempt at encouraging a heart to heart conversation,’ added Professor Suwanda H. J. Sugunasiri, Founder, Nalanda College of Buddhist Studies.”72

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69 This is the Cinnamon Gardens of Colombo, but second to Rosedale.


I would also come to be featured in a *Toronto Star* column by Joe Serge and featured side by side with Rev. Ted Scott, the Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada (1980’s), developing with him a close enough relationship to go for a coffee or lunch.

An academic paper published on the basis of these experiences, and teaching at the University of Toronto later was “Spiritual Interaction, not Interfaith Dialogue: a Buddhistic Contribution”\(^{73}\).

My most formal interfaith activity was at the Academic level, when I taught a course ‘Dynamics of Interfaith’ at the Divinity Faculty of Trinity College, University of Toronto. For the first time, Christian students were exposed to not only other religions, such as Buddhism and Islam, but also Religious Humanism, Taoism and Confucianism. But a most interesting personal experience for the students was meeting Christians of other denominations - Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, for the first time in their lives, although they had all lived in the same city or elsewhere in Canada all their lives!

### 4.3 Input into Government

Invited to serve on the *Ontario Provincial Interfaith Committee on Chaplaincy*, a semi-government outfit, Sugunasiri the Educator\(^{74}\) was to draw up a plan and a curriculum for the training of non-Christian Chaplains. Though there were to be trainees from the different faiths – Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Native Canadian, only the Buddhist, and the only woman trainee, in fact, completed the course, held within a penitentiary. In the end, however, she was unable to get a placement in the system, still dominated by Christian males.

A more public activity was to serve on an Ad Hoc Interfaith Committee on the Canadian Constitution. The issue was the Preamble to the Canadian Constitution. Below are shown side by side the Beaudoin-Dobbie version that ended up in the constitution and the Sugunasiri version, the underlined highlighting the differences:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beaudoin-Dobbie</th>
<th>Sugunasiri</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We affirm that our country is founded upon principles that acknowledge the supremacy of God</td>
<td>We affirm that our country is founded upon principles that acknowledge the supremacy of God Now cradles others, too, seeking spirituality exclusively from within.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{73}\) Sugunasiri, 1996.

\(^{74}\) The writer is an Educator in two senses. One is having academic qualifications in Education (MEd, Moral Philosophy in Education), with my PhD also earned from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, as a student of the Curriculum Department. The second comes from my experience in classroom teaching.
We treasure
The dignity of each person, the dignity of each person,
the importance of family, the importance of family, and
the value of community, the value of community,
in relationship with each other in relationship with each other
in relationship with nature.75

As can be seen, while I saw the justice in keeping the words ‘acknowledge the supremacy of God’,
given that the majority of Canadians were of a theistic orientation, I also wanted to include others – not just
the Buddhists but the nearly 25% of Canadians who had declared having no religion76.

My wording was not to receive a fair hearing. Hearing the news, the Toronto Star carried the story
front page, with a picture of me standing on the circular stairway of our home, with a Buddha Figure in the
background77.

4.4 Buddhism in the Media

TV

An early approach to making the presence of Buddhism known in wider Canada was to use the media. A
free community channel offered by Rogers Canada, the BFC organized programs to introduce the various
Buddhist communities. Q & A sessions included, one of the early Sangha participants was the newly minted
Ajahn Viradhammo, a native of Ottawa ordained in Thailand, and currently of the Tisarana Buddhist
Monastery near Perth, Ontario. But the pinnacle of TV exposure for Buddhism was Wesak 1985,
television across Canada coast to coast by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, under its Open House.
Most recently (2006), it was the 13part series telecast on OMNI – a community Channel, me serving as
consultant and Dr. Veronique Ramses78, long-time supporter, serving as Producer, and Glen Choi, former


76 “Irreligion is common throughout all provinces and territories of Canada. Irreligious Canadians include atheists, agnostics, and
humanists. The surveys may also include those who are deists, spiritual and pantheists. The 2011 Canadian census reported that
23.9% of Canadians declare no religious affiliation. According to Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, among those
estimated 4.9 million Canadians of no religion, an estimated 1.9 million would specify atheist, 1.8 would specify agnostic, and

77 For the picture that appeared on the front page of the Toronto Star, see <http://www.gettyimages.ca/pictures/toronto-buddhist-
suwanda-sugunasiri-says-a-proposed-news-photo-502244923#toronto-buddhi>.

78 You can see her here, attending the Buddhism Heritage Day at the Ontario Legislature when she brought her class at York
University <http://buddhistcouncil.ca/>.
A critical opportunity to take Buddhism to Christians in particular came when I was invited to introduce Buddhism on 100 Huntley Street, a Catholic Evangelical station. It was a licensing requirement of the Canadian Radio and Television Corporation that the station allow a certain percentage of air time for other religions. In my presentation, I was bold enough to say up front, ‘God is a fiction of the human imagination’, the reference, of course, being to the Judeo-Christian Creator. The words went into hundreds of thousand Christian homes across Canada!

**Print Media**

Writing a Column in the *Saturday Star* (1993-1998) began thanks to an introduction given to the Editor of the Saturday Star Vian Ewart by Glen Mullin, Editor of the *BCC Journal* (see above). My columns looked at contemporary issues from a Buddhist perspective. Among the topics dealt were (in alpha order), Abortion, Bare breasts, Celibacy, Cloning, Death, Euthanasia, Four Letter words, Homosexuality, Kindness, Meditation, Organ Donation, Perfection, Soul. One of the most pleasurable experiences writing in a paper with a million readership coast to coast was receiving personal mail from the readers, but also published responses, both critical and appreciative.

**4.5 Buddhism to the Masses via Publications, Seminars, Courses and Meditation**

Going on TV and writing for the newspapers were, of course, impersonal in the sense of making no contact with the viewers / readers. My strategy at taking Buddhism to the masses face to face was to offer courses through the *Learning Annex*, a business outfit that offered courses that would attract the average young crowd of the professional type, in mini-skirts and high heels, or jeans and long hair or no hair, and in between. There was never a cancellation of an advertised session due to lack of enrolment, the minimum being 20. Classes held in schools, hotel rooms and such other public places, usually in the evenings, I would begin the two-hour Seminar by asking the participants to write down any questions on Buddhism they wanted clarified. While the scribbled down questions would be answered in the course of the presentation, the topic itself would be as advertised. However, included in practically every course was about 20 minutes of meditation, seated as they were on their chairs, closing their eyes. The part many invariably liked about the experience

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80 See Sugunasiri, 2005 for a collection.
is “acknowledge anything you, hear, smell, etc., or any thoughts, or any body pain; but neither go after nor reject, but telling yourself, ‘I’m with my breath’”. This was a new experience to them. Today, in North America, Mindful Meditation is a meme – something fashionable that everyone would like to be seen doing. It is a hit in medical, penitentiary, education, business, government, etc.\(^1\), as popularized by the Jewish Acquired Buddhist Jon Kabat-Zinn\(^2\), even though “He removed the Buddhist framework and eventually downplayed any connection between mindfulness and Buddhism, instead putting MBSR in a scientific context”\(^3\). Police Officers in Mississauga\(^4\) are the latest to join the club. So it is with some sense of calm happiness that I reflect that I may have been one of the earliest to introduce the calm of mindfulness meditation to the professional and the average Torontonian.

Another of my attempts to take Buddhism to the average adult was to offer courses through University of Toronto Extension Division. It was different from the Learning Annex type of course in two ways: it was a course of several weeks, though with no assignments to hand in or marked, and it entailed no meditation.

V. Nalanda College of Buddhist Studies: Beyond the Field into the Academy

Everything above in which the writer has had the good fortune of providing leadership has been in the general field. But, earning my formal credentials in Buddhism, with an MA in the Scientific Study of Buddhism (University of Toronto), I was to launch a ‘Seminars on Buddhism’ series at Trinity College in the early nineties. Among the topics covered were:

*North American Perceptions of Buddhism; Cambodian Refugees in Canada; Poverty in the Pali Canon; Koan and Kensho in the Rinzai Zen Curriculum; Women in Tang Dynasty Buddhism; Tibetan Medicine; Pudgalavada: The Buddhist Doctrine of Indeterminate Buddhism; Engaged Buddhism and Buddhist Skillful Means (upāya).*

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\(^{1}\) The Program is called Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR).

\(^{2}\) See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jon_Kabat-Zinn> for a write up on Kabatt-Zinn and BBSR program.

\(^{3}\) “Currently, there is an important debate taking place among Buddhists, peace activists, academics and thoughtful citizens about the application of Buddhist mindfulness practices for the US military including soldiers and drone pilots...” Christopher Titmus. See <http://christophertitmusblog.org/are-buddhist-mindfulness-practices-used-to-support-international-war-crimes>.

\(^{4}\) The meditation is led by Bhante Saranapala of the Mississauga Buddhist Temple and Meditation Centre. Here are some pictures: http://www.wildmind.org/blogs/on-practice/you-have-the-right-to-remain-silent.
It ended with a series of Audiovisual presentations under the title ‘Journeys to Sacred Landscapes’ under which I had the occasion to present the ancient civilization of Sri Lanka, filmed during our first visit back to the country in 1999, after 25 years in Canada.

The last topic, *Buddhist Skillful Means* (*upāya*) also provided an opportunity to hold a Roundtable. A more formal Conference was on Rita Gross’s publication, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, a hit in the North American market at the time.

The Seminars and the Conferences gave an indication as to the interest in the academic study of Buddhism. This was when a decision was made to offer Buddhism formally towards academic credit. Attempts to offer it through Trinity College itself, and later through the Department for the Study of Religion, not succeeding, there came to be born Nalanda College of Buddhist Studies, featured on the Radio show ‘Metro Morning’ of Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC).

The Founder’s vision of the Toronto College of Buddhist Studies, as it was known initially, and later changed to Nalanda College of Buddhist Studies, and registered with the government, was captured in the words, ‘Cultivating a Community of Better Human Beings’. But the initial ‘Class of 2000’ of 25 students walking through the doors on Sept 08, 2000 could only but expect the highest academic standards.

The College offered a 1-year Certificate in Buddhist Studies and a 2-year Diploma in Buddhist Studies, meditation being a mandatory course, but not evaluated. An innovative course was ‘Pali as a Living Language’, when learning entailed students dialoguing in pairs in class. Another, intended for the Sangha alone, and free of charge, was English as a Second Language for Dhamma.

Traveling across Canada, Nalanda was to find ready acceptance by the various universities. But under one condition: government accreditation.

Our application to the Provincial Educational Quality Assessment Board (PEQAB) made, an Evaluating Committee appointed by PEQAB itself came to see Nalanda as “a unique Buddhist academic institution as nowhere else in the world”. Recommended to grant consent, the Minister of Education, Christopher Bentley, was to decline consent! Reasons given: ‘policy considerations’.

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86 <peqab.ca/Archive/NalandaBuddhadharmaConsent.pdf>.
Just as when NCBS was opened, even today, no Canadian university offers a systematic Program of Buddhist Studies, even though, of course, more and more courses are coming to be offered.

VI. Creative Research in the Canadian Buddhist Academy

However, the Canadian Buddhist Academy can be said to be an area of growth. When I started the Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies in 2005, a Professor colleague wrote down the number of Canadian academics in the area of Buddhist studies on the back of a serviette, counting under ten. Today, the mailing list of the Journal has over 80 names! Also today, even though there is no systematic program of Buddhist studies, as that introduced at Nalanda College of Buddhist Studies, at any Canadian university, just about every university now has a course or two related to Buddhism. And, of course, a student could do a Master’s Degree or a Doctorate in an area related to Buddhism. In terms of language associated with Buddhism, while Chinese and Tibetan have been taught at the universities for a decade or more, Pali also has come to be introduced finally, this at the University of Toronto. In terms of walking the talk, while not all the Professors that teach in the area of Buddhist studies come with a personal commitment, most are, and no more do they have a hesitancy to own it up, coming out of the closet. While the primary contingent of Professors come from among the AB, there is also beginning to be from among IB’s as well, this simply being an observation, with the selection process, of course, not based in ethnicity but strictly guided by academic needs and standards.

Still under the Academy would be my own groundbreaking research, retirement seemingly allowing a creative intellectual rejuvenation. The first was identifying Arahant Mahinda as Redactor of the Buddhapujâva (Homage to the Buddha) in Sinhala, the oldest and the most comprehensive in the world. While the research began with an innocent enough attempt to have a translation in good English of the Training Principles (aka Precepts) (sikkhāpada) – Five, Eight and Ten, for the benefit of the younger generation in particular living in an overseas setting, it ended up identifying the Redactor. Another of our findings is that while the Five TP’s can be directly traced to the Buddha, the genius for creating the

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87 My research, clearly part of the Canadian Buddhist Academy, has been introduced here since it is not well known at the moment, either in the Academy or the wider Buddhist community, practitioners or otherwise. Another reason is to show another beam of the prism.

Higher Discipline of the Eight and the Ten Precepts, not found in the Canon but drawn upon it, lies with Arahant Mahinda. Identified in my research is also the most likely date of the launch of the Higher Discipline, in the context of initiating Queen Anula, consort of the younger brother of King Devanampiyatissa.

My next research breakthrough relates to the Aggaña Sutta (D iii 27) that had baffled scholars. What I saw in it was the Buddha unfolding the universe, the research published initially in the form of a paper, “Devolution and Evolution in the Aggaña Sutta”89. But it ends up as a book, Dhamma Aboard Evolution (2013) 90 as I get into a comparative mode with Westernscience, finding much compatibility, the Buddha even improving upon it. E.g., while the Big Bang in Westernscience is the beginning of Evolution, in the Buddhist schema of an evolving and devolving cycle with no beginning or end, it is only the end of the immediately previous Devolution Phase of the earlier cycle, serving as a condition for the next Evolution Phase.

My next breakthrough was the clear identification of the three terms used by the Buddha for what has been translated as ‘consciousness’, namely mano, citta and viññāna, in terms of their function – Mano as Gatekeeper (Door), Citta as Judge and Viññāna as CEO of the city called the mindbody, the paper titled ‘Triune Mind in Buddhism: A Textual Exploration”91. A further step in the research was comparative, paralleling the Triune Mind with the Triune Brain as proposed by Evolutionary Biologist Paul MacLean. Under criticism by neurologists, I was to save the theory by drawing upon the Buddhist phylogenetic label satto ‘sentient being’ under which falls both humans and animals92. I also identify the physical home for each of mano, citta and viññāna - Amygdala, Basal ganglia.. and Hypothalamus respectively93.

Finally, my current research is on Gandhabba, entailing what is commonly and erroneously (as I show) as ‘Rebirth’, perhaps the most contentious of the Buddha’s Teachings for the AB, and the westerner in general. If conception is seen in Westernscience, as also in the wider world, as resulting from parental union, the Buddha posits three conditions: mother in season, parental union and the presence of Gandhabba.

89 <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/65093>.

90 Sugunasiri, 2014.

91 <https://www.academia.edu/16555392/TRIUNE_MIND FINDS_HOME_IN_TRIUNE_BRAIN: _An_Exercise_in_ Buddhianscience_and_Westernscience>. 


The research model developed by me shows how, following death, there indeed comes to be a Rebecoming, though not immediately into a human or animal family, but as an ‘interbecoming’ (antarābhava)\textsuperscript{94}. The research, benefiting from Western science as well as the Canon, provides, for the first time perhaps, the scientific basis for what has popularly come to be called Rebirth, i.e., the process of life after life, the Buddha’s term, as above, being Rebecoming (punabbhava).

Finally I come to my latest self-identified role, namely, as trumpeter for the Buddha – as if he needs one! It is thus I invite the academic community to have ‘Trust in the Buddha as a Methodological Imperative’\textsuperscript{95}, just the same way Trust in God has been to Western scientists even up to the time of Einstein – ‘Subtle is the Lord’ are his words\textsuperscript{96}, Darwin himself being a “devout Anglican” until 13 years after Galapagos\textsuperscript{97}.

**VII. Buddhism in Canada Here to Stay!**

Overall, thanks to several conditions, Buddhism can now be said to be at the final stage 5 of ‘Being embraced’, coming past Stage 1. Hostility (‘enemy alien’), 2. Disregard (early Buddhists under the point system), 3. Tolerance (as under the policy of Multiculturalism) and 4. Sympathetic look at (as by Acquired Buddhists). All signs are indicative of the growth of Buddhism, both in terms of respect earned as well as numbers. In this context, one of the strongest indicators is the active participation of and the leadership provided by women, both IB and AB, and both Lay and Sangha. The ordering of the categories IB and AB, and Lay and Sangha, reflects not only my own experience with them, but also the Canadian Buddhist scene taken chronologically\textsuperscript{98}.

However, this is not to say that being a Buddhist in Canada has been, or is still, not without its difficulties. As recently as under five years ago, I was to hear from a woman AB how her landlord/landlady was acting unfriendly, to put it mildly, for the fact of her being Buddhist. But this is a far cry from my own experience of what may be indicative of ‘systemic discrimination’, in the early post-multicultural era.

\textsuperscript{94} While the term antarābhava itself doesn’t occur in the Canon, I show how the Buddha allows for it. See also Prof. Emerita Lily de Silva, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka, arguing for the possibility of the concept in Pali Buddhism (de Silva, Lily, 2004).

\textsuperscript{95} See Sugunasiri, 2014, 209-221.

\textsuperscript{96} This is the title of the study on Einstein by Pais, 1982.

\textsuperscript{97} Zimmer, 2001, 340; 342.

\textsuperscript{98} See Sugunasiri, 2017, for a detailed treatment.
Invited to a Papal Church Service in Toronto, I, along with leaders of non-Christian faiths, had sat just behind the Pope on the stage during the ceremony, giving it an interfaith aura. But at the end of the service, only the Christians were to be introduced to him! In another experience, invited to a public event in which Queen Elizabeth was present, the leaders from monotheistic religions were invited to the microphone, while the polytheistic Hindu and the atheistic Buddhist leaders were only to be seen! I was to write a Toronto Star column capturing both experiences, under the title, “Multifaith Service’ lost a big opportunity”.

However, if we are much past all that, the respect earned by Buddhism, as noted above, is undoubtedly the critical ‘external’ factor that can be said to be conducive to the growing impact of Buddhism on Canadian soil. And supporting it are several other ‘internal’ factors, i.e., present within the Canadian Buddhist community itself. The first is the robust presence of the ordained Sangha, both Inherited Buddhists and Acquired Buddhists, both male and female. There is also coming to be an increasing number of IB Sangha, having both English Skills as well as higher academic qualifications. Secondly, associated with it is the leadership emerging within the Sangha. The recent Unity Wesak celebrations in Mississauga, attended by over 3000, leaves no doubt that the Sangha has finally regained its traditional leadership role, the lay leaders now playing second fiddle, facilitating, as they must, the work of the Sangha leadership. Thirdly, there is the leadership growing within the AB community, the IB community not in competition. Although it is not towards unity, a goal already well met by the IB community, it is to provide leadership in their own individual ways. And a healthy development in this regard is the increasing leadership provided by women, both Acquired and Inherited Buddhists. Then there are the meditation retreats, and the professional services in areas such as psychiatry, counseling, etc. Finally is the Buddhist Academy providing the information on the diverse dimensions of Buddhism.

It is to be hoped then that embracing the Buddha’s wise and compassionate words, with an ‘unabated joy’ (aveccappasada), more and more Canadians will help themselves to underdevelop their individual and personal suffering through self-restraint cultivated via the five Training Principles, if at snail pace. Slow and steady wins the race, hasn’t it been said!

VIII. Closure


100 ‘Underdevelop’ is a term introduced by Frank, 1966, to mean some element weakening in the same process of another growing. An example would be the poor getting poorer as the rich get rich. In our context, it would the akusala citta (unskillful mind) getting emaciated as the kusala citta (skillful mind) comes to be cultivated.
It has indeed been a pleasure to have had the opportunity to give you a bird’s eye view of Buddhism in Canada in its early phase and share my own little contribution in shaping it. A short paper such as the present one, of course, can do no justice to the vast field of Buddhism in Canada. There is no doubt that we may have missed many a detail relating to this early phase of Buddhism in Canada, even in relation to Toronto and Central Canada. However, our brief outline can be said to be certainly reflective of the ground reality of the presence of a diversity of world Buddhism in the Canadian scene, made up of both IB’s as well as AB’s, of whatever school or tradition.

Looking back, it appears, analytically speaking, that I have been wearing many a hat—fieldworker within the Buddhist fold seeking Buddhist unity, publicist and the public face outside of it, educator, academic and populist writer. To what extent the seeds sown by this writer, both within the Buddhist community as well as in the wider Canadian community, have begun to sprout or will continue to sprout in the context of Buddhism in Canada as well as the wider Canadian scope—only time will tell. But I am happy to see it growing, now under an efficient multi-leadership.

Wishing you the best in health and happiness!

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101 I thank Dr. Bryan Levman for his critical comments on this paper. But, of course, the writer remains responsible for all errors, in fact or in judgment.
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