

Buddhism in Canada

Edited by
Bruce Matthews



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BUDDHISM IN CANADA

Buddhism has become a major religion in Canada over the last half-century. The 'ethnic Buddhism' associated with immigrant Asian peoples is the most important aspect, but there is also a growing constituency of Euro-Canadian Buddhists seriously interested in the faith. This book analyzes the phenomenon of Buddhism in Canada from a regional perspective, providing a review of the history of Buddhism and an analysis of its current situation in the provinces and in three major metropolitan areas. The work provides an important examination of the place of Buddhism in a developed Western country associated with a traditional Judeo-Christian culture, but a country nonetheless undergoing profound sociological transformation due in no small part to large-scale immigration and religio-cultural pluralism.

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FOREWORD

Paul Bramadat

For most of its roughly 2,500 years, Buddhism has been confined to various parts of Asia. However, at least two phenomena have introduced the tradition to a great many people outside Asia. First, of course, the interaction in the past half millennia between European scholars, clerics, merchants, soldiers, and colonizers on the one hand and the inhabitants of predominantly Buddhist (or Buddhist-influenced) regions on the other hand have brought Buddhism into the imaginations of many people in the West. While such forays into the Orient produced highly distorted images of the East that still bedevil us today (Said 1978; Paper, Paper and Lai 2005), these several centuries of interaction did lay the groundwork for the more favourable contemporary reception of Buddhism in the West.

Second, and more recently, a number of changes within the spheres of communication, capitalism, and mass transportation have made it possible for millions of Buddhists to migrate to North America. Such migrations have been occurring for a variety of reasons for over a hundred years (and longer in Europe), but these movements clearly entered an entirely new phase by the 1960s, due to the global reorganization occasioned by World War II. These historical changes in international migration patterns are interesting, but this is not the place to consider them.¹ What is worth noting, though, is that while there have been small Buddhist communities in Canada since the beginning of the twentieth century, the numbers of Buddhists in this country have increased dramatically in roughly the past twenty years. This is partly due to the fact that in the late 1960s, federal policy makers dramatically revised their approaches both to immigration and Canadian culture.

Regarding the question of Canadian culture, most readers will know that Prime Minister Trudeau's 1971 inauguration of the Multiculturalism Policy represented a fairly significant change in the way the Canadian national meta-narrative was to be reconstructed. Although there are still debates about why the policy was launched and whether it was and is effective, public opinion polls consistently show that most Canadians embrace the policy and the progressive ethical ideals on which it is founded.²

Regarding the question of immigration, some readers will be unfamiliar with the fact that our immigration policies were once rather unapologetically based on race (or, to put it another way, were generated by racism). After World War II, as racism became increasingly discredited, Canadian and American policy makers and cultural leaders rejected these policies as ineffective means of preparing ourselves for the more multicultural world so many people felt was emerging. The highly problematic 'quota' system that had helped for decades to 'keep Canada white' (a popular slogan in the early part of the twentieth century) finally gave way at the end of the 1960s to the 'point' system. According to this new approach – still in place today, in modified form – immigration candidates are deemed acceptable if they accumulate a certain number of points which are awarded for their education level, family status, occupational experience, proficiency in one of the two official languages, and so on. These policy changes opened the door to many Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, and fundamentally altered the nature of Canadian immigration. Moreover, as any study of contemporary Canadian Buddhism will demonstrate, many Buddhists also found their way to Canada as refugees in the wake of the Vietnam War, the Chinese invasion of Tibet, and the Cambodian genocide.

While it is very difficult to determine with much precision the size of what is variously called the non-Asian, white, convert, non-ethnic, or Euro-American Buddhist population, anecdotal evidence suggests that their numbers are significant. Their forms and levels of involvement in Buddhism might be, in historical terms, somewhat unusual,³ but they are an increasingly important segment of the larger Buddhist community. Although this is not the central concern of these chapters, part of the backdrop of this book is the tension between 'Asian' or 'ethnic' and 'Western' or 'non-Asian' Buddhists. In Canada, even within the same sub-tradition of Buddhism, Asian and non-Asian groups often operate separately, in what Numrich (1996) calls 'parallel congregations.' While some Asians are concerned that Westerners and some 'new agers' are merely dabbling temporarily in a deep and demanding tradition, some non-Asians are concerned that Asian practitioners are perhaps too attached to culture-bound (e.g., strictly Thai or Sinhalese) accretions rather than the strictly religious or spiritual elements of Buddhism.

Although there are Buddhist groups across Canada, it is easy to see why Cambodian and Vietnamese refugees and their children, relatively recent and economically mobile Chinese business class immigrants, third- or fourth-generation overwhelmingly exogamous integrated Japanese, and non-Asian Buddhists, would find it very difficult to work together to build a pan-Buddhist or ecumenical movement in this country. Nevertheless, although the linguistic, cultural, and social class differences between these groups tend to militate against the kinds of institutions that seem to be necessary to ensure the future health of Buddhism, we are presently witnessing the

beginnings of some of these structures (most obviously, the Nalanda College of Buddhist Studies, and Buddhismcanada.com).

In short, a variety of forces have combined to greatly increase the Buddhist presence in Canada. At the same time, most Canadians know very little about Buddhism. In his Preface, Bruce Matthews echoes Charles Prebish (1999: 234) by noting that the study of Buddhism in North America is in its infancy. In *Buddhism in Canada*, Matthews and his colleagues have provided readers with an extremely valuable contribution to the public and private conversations many people are having about a tradition that is no longer strictly associated with distant lands and epochs. The question is whether or not non-Buddhist Canadians are prepared to understand this tradition, or to relate constructively with its communities and practitioners. The answer to both questions is, emphatically, no. Research conducted by Chris Klassen (2002) indicates that with a few exceptions (notably, in Québec), most Canadian secondary schools do not consistently offer education about religion to their students; and, when such elective courses are offered, they are rarely promoted. Of course, what Lois Sweet calls our 'religious illiteracy' (1997) is not simply a by-product of an ill-conceived secularization of our schools. In fact, virtually throughout our governments and in most places in our media, religion is treated as either dangerous, doomed to extinction, or at least a strictly private matter. Consequently, we know little about Buddhism or our Buddhist neighbours (not to mention our Christian, Muslim, and Sikh neighbours).

Buddhism in Canada functions first and foremost as a kind of national Buddhist 'map.' In this sense, it is an important step in the study of this tradition in Canada. Clearly, this book will serve as the reference point for future in-depth studies of the temples, traditions, and leaders the authors discuss. Furthermore, as local and national policy makers endeavour to improve the way governments respond to religious – rather than merely ethnic or racial – differences, they will benefit from this book's broad topographical sketch of the tradition. In addition, the book also offers several thick descriptions of particular groups and individuals. Matthews' discussion of Trungpa Rinpoche's time and legacy in Halifax, and White's consideration of the challenges the Lao community faced in Caledon are just two examples of the kinds of portraits that will help to add some ethnographic detail to the map.

There are elements of Canadian institutions, history, and society that are often promoted by our governments as core features of our culture (e.g., hockey, politeness, Medicare), but the inhabitants of this vast geography have never been able to agree upon a single unifying culture, ideology, or identity. Many Canadians are beginning to feel a sense of pride in our much celebrated (and often criticized) willingness to accept the cultural changes and ambiguities that are associated with evolving demographic, moral, and political realities. With this in mind, it is not surprising that Buddhists,

FOREWORD

whose tradition seeks to illuminate the impermanence at the heart of the universe, would find Canada to be a congenial environment in which to root and recreate their lives and tradition. Those of us interested in Buddhism in Canada will find this book to be a most helpful guide to the new terrain of Canadian religion.

Notes

- 1 See Ebaugh and Saltzman Chafetz 2002; Haddad, *et al.* 2003; Bramadat and Seljak 2005; *Journal of International Migration and Integration*.
- 2 However, the xenophobic backlash against Muslims and others in the aftermath of 11 September 2001 indicates that at least some Canadians do not, or do not unequivocally, support all of the goals of the Multiculturalism Policy.
- 3 In other words, some are 'nightstand' Buddhists, some are 'New Age' Buddhists, some are serious practitioners (who might take vows and become monks or nuns), some are closely associated with a specific, well-defined Asian Buddhist teacher or school of thought, some pick and choose from the various leaders and traditions, some import elements of Buddhist practice or thought into their core Christian or Jewish identities. This is, of course, just a partial list of the various ways a non-Asian might express his or her Buddhism.

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PREFACE

Bruce Matthews

Buddhism has a fascinating history in Canada. This book aims to show how the faith has developed in Canada, and something of its present circumstances. The contributors focus on specific geographical regions. The account unfolds from west to east, beginning with a review of Buddhism in British Columbia by James Placzek and Larry DeVries, for the West Coast was the site of the original migration of Asian Buddhists in the mid-nineteenth century and is still a vital centre of Buddhist activity and culture. An addendum to this chapter by Victor Chan on the impact of the visit of the Dalai Lama to Vancouver in the spring of 2004 provides an interesting insight into the importance of Asian Buddhist leadership and image in the Canadian context. Leslie Kawamura sets down the story in Alberta, and James Mullens the two prairie provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Kay Koppedrayner and Mavis Fenn examine Buddhism in Ontario, and Janet McLellan the city of Toronto, which claims the most diverse number of Buddhist communities in the country. Marybeth White offers a 'thick description' of a unique situation with the Lao Buddhist community in that city, alerting us to several challenges that confront ethnic Buddhist groups in many parts of the nation. Louis-Jacques Dorais provides an analysis of Buddhism in Québec, with special focus on the Vietnamese community. Mathieu Boisvert, Manuel Litalien and François Thibeault have provided a valuable survey of Buddhism in Canada's largest French-speaking city, Montréal. Bruce Matthews shows that the Atlantic provinces may not have significant numbers of Buddhists, but what sects and communities there are give a fascinating glimpse into the spread of the faith into this sparsely populated and traditional region, reminding us that there is not a province or territory in Canada (including Nunavut in the far north) that does not have some Buddhist outreach or expression. A final appendix by George Klima relates to a vital website that he has carefully constructed of hundreds of Canadian Buddhist organizations, a resource of significance for anyone interested in the enormous diversity of the Buddhist experience in this land. I need as well to thank five others in particular: Paul Bramadat of the University of Winnipeg (and recent editor and author, along with David Seljak, of *Religion and Ethnicity*

in Canada)¹ for kindly agreeing to write the Foreword; Robert Florida of the University of Victoria, British Columbia, has helped in editing some of the work in this volume, as has Mrs Herbert (Lee) Lewis of Wolfville. Lindsay Taylor, a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at Acadia University, and Leanna McDonald in my office, have kindly helped guide the manuscript over its entire evolution as a computerized document.

These chapters will largely speak for themselves. Most of the contributors began discussion on the need for such a record at a symposium on 'Buddhism and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism', held at Bishop's University in Lennoxville, Québec, in 1999. Two years before, I had participated as the Canadian contributor at an international conference on 'The State of Buddhist Studies in the World', at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. The task of preparation gave me the opportunity to review Canadian scholarly work on Buddhism produced over the last twenty-five years. There was, in fact, a great deal, but only a small sector of that published scholarship dealt directly with the Canadian Buddhist experience, notably work by Roy Amore (1979), Elliot Tepper (1980), Louis-Jacques Dorais (1993) and Janet McLellan (1999).² The Lennoxville symposium stimulated a more detailed, published record of Buddhism in our land. In discussing how to 'characterize' the different kinds of Buddhism (to use the language of Jan Nattier), we considered separate reviews of ethnic Buddhism identified with specific cultures or 'vehicles' (*yānas*), Euro-Canadian Buddhism, and a seemingly evolving 'North Americanized' or 'Canadianized' Buddhism.³ We noted that previous ground-breaking work on Buddhism in the United States by such scholars as Charles Prebish (1979, 1999, with Tanaka 1998), Rick Fields (1981), Paul Numrich (1996) and Kenneth Tanaka (1999) used one or more of these approaches to explore a complex subject. In the end, however, we decided that the best way for us to consider the topic in the Canadian context was from a geographical perspective. In this regard, we are conscious of the limitations such a method imposes. There are a few 'thick descriptions' to be sure, but in general the chapters are deliberately designed to set down in broad terms relevant historical information and reviews of the current state of the religion in Canadian society. As contributors, only two of us (Leslie Kawamura and Victor Chan) come directly from an ethnic Buddhist background. In this regard, we take seriously the caution of E. H. Rick Jarrow when he warns about the danger of 'outsider' research becoming a kind of 'voyeurism . . . the non-involved gaze that may theorize without the risk of contact . . . a disembodied objectivity' (Hori 2002: 108). Hopefully our chapters go beyond this dismal prospect, and offer informative and empathetic accounts of this great global religion in the contemporary Canadian circumstance.

By way of background, I turn now to offer some general observations on the subject of Buddhism in Canada. The Canadian federal census (Statistics Canada 2001) indicates that just over 300,000 people specify a Buddhist affiliation (1 per cent of the total population), though official statistics do

not likely tell the whole story.⁴ The question of who is a Buddhist has always been at the forefront of any inquiry such as this. The two most widely cited groupings are ethnic and so-called Euro-Canadian Buddhists, though because there will be adherents who do not fit either of these categories, some argue that such characterization needs to be fine-tuned (e.g., a specifically 'Canadian' Buddhism may be emerging as a third category).

Ethnic Buddhism is perhaps easier to identify and define in all regions of Canada (though it is clearly not 'ethnic' to those who practice it). It arrived first as the faith of immigrant Asian peoples on the West Coast in the mid-nineteenth century, almost all of whom worked as labourers in the railway and agricultural industries. Within a half century, a substantial number – or their progeny – had moved east, to the towns and cities of the Prairies, Ontario and Québec. Some ventured further to the Maritimes. They took up different occupations and professions, gradually moving into the middle class. As the generation gap widened for Asian Buddhists (e.g., Japanese Issei, Nisei and Sansei), along with access to the English or French languages, the challenge of assimilation into the world-view and customs of a largely Judeo-Christian and Caucasian majority greatly increased. Notwithstanding this, all our contributors have identified and described numerous ethnic Buddhist groups that are highly successful in promoting their native Asian culture, at the same time as becoming 'Canadian' in every sense of the word.

It is an imperative of our analysis to indicate the impact on Buddhism of several modifications to the Canadian Immigration Act in 1962, 1978 and 1989. The initial legislation was directed towards traditional immigrants, replacing the older selection process based on race with one centered on education and ability. Chinese immigrants in particular benefited from this change. There was the added feature of making family reunification a high priority, and by 1970, the Chinese immigrant population in Canada (which was, incidentally, largely Buddhist) expanded to 120,000. In 1976, largely as a result of the social chaos in Indochina precipitated by the Vietnam War, Canada again adjusted its immigration policy in order to accommodate 60,000 displaced Indochinese (and largely Buddhist) refugees. The number more than doubled with the addition of the Orderly Departure Program, which brought entire extended families to sanctuary in Canada. In 1989, precipitated in part by China's Tiananmen Square incident and its aftermath, and a new Entrepreneur and Investor Class, immigration policy attracted Hong Kong Chinese immigrants and raised the number of Chinese in Canada to over 600,000 by the turn of the millennium. McLellan emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between 'immigrant Buddhist' and 'refugee Buddhist' (1999: 20, 193), and the needs, both cultural and spiritual, that these two quite different communities might have, given the hardships which precipitated their departure. For example, no branch of ethnic Buddhism is without some aspect of an indigenous Little Tradition, the animistic, spirit religion that coexists with Buddhism in all parts of Asia. For 'refugee

Buddhists', the loss of proximity to the homeland, to ancestors and to 'spirits' is especially keen. But Van Esterik (1992: 114) points out how for all ethnic Buddhists, 'recreating Buddhist institutions' in Canada is a special challenge. Ritual corners must be cut, so to speak, to accommodate a new sense of time and place.

Other adjustments for ethnic Buddhism in a strange land include difficulties in establishing an indigenous Canadian monastic order, intermarriage with non-Asians, a less traditional role for women, survival of the cultural basis of the Buddhist faith (especially for Canadian-born generations), and relationships with other Buddhists from differing cultural backgrounds. As Kenneth Tanaka has pointed out,

Buddhist groups in North America find themselves in an immensely pluralistic religious environment . . . The plurality of religions also characterizes the Buddhist groups as well, for virtually every school of Buddhism has now found a foothold on American soil. These schools now exist side by side, often in the same community – a situation unthinkable in Asia, where they often had no knowledge of each other.

(Prebish and Tanaka 1998: 294)

In Canada, ethnic Buddhism remains for the most part culturally insular, not because a particular group thinks other ethnic Buddhist expressions are less adequate or legitimate, but simply because of the comfort of belonging to a particular community. Although there are a few disparate examples of attempts to bring ethnic Buddhists together in the Canadian setting (e.g., the efforts of Suwanda Sugunasiri in Toronto to form a Buddhist Council of Canada, or the cross-cultural annual assembly of Buddhists in Nova Scotia for *Vesak*⁵), in general ethnic Buddhism in Canada remains culturally exclusivist.

An important reason for this attitude is Canada's official policy of multiculturalism, introduced in the 1970s by then Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau as a means of promoting immigrant integration, but not assimilation, into Canadian society. Other objectives include the reduction of discrimination, and the enhancement of cultural awareness and understanding among the Canadian public. A new federal government so-called Ministry of Canadian Heritage, established in 1993, has assisted the financing of ethnic cultural (but not specifically religious) projects, with the result that in some places, Buddhist 'temples' are in fact found in 'cultural centres' rather than religious edifices *per se*. The essential point is that ethnic Buddhist organizations now have full legal parity with the earlier established Christian churches and Jewish synagogues. Nonetheless, some immigrant spokespersons object to multiculturalism, claiming that it encourages a psychology of separation, 'that people, coming here from elsewhere, wish to remain what they have