

Buddhism in Toronto: an Oral History - Some Participatory Observations

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(presented at the Buddhism Heritage Day,
Oct. 10 2013, Ontario Legislature
- and vastly enlarged here)

Respected Sangha, MPP Dipika Damerla, Bhante Dr. Saranapala, Professors, students, colleagues and friends:

Thank you, MPP Damerla, for your kind invitation to the Buddhist Council of Canada, represented here today by our Secretary, Mr. Bryan Levman and myself, our Treasurer, Ms. Usha Heer being out of the country. Thank you, Frances Siu, for all the leg work, and thank you Bryan, for everything done at our end.

Thank you all for accepting our invitation to join us today, at short notice, and taking time out on a working day.

Oct. 10th: A historic day. Oct 10, 1904. Yes, you heard me right. 1904. That was when the Japanese Canadian Buddhists came together, at the home of Tadaichi Nagao, for the first time as a group, opening the first Buddhist Church - yes, it's called a church even today, the very next year.¹

It was also in October 1980 that the Buddhists of Toronto assembled in a room at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at University of Toronto where I had recently earned a doctorate. Helping me was Fujikawa Sensei of the Toronto Buddhist Church. It was to plan to attend an interfaith service at the Bloor United Church, organized by the World Conference on Religion for Peace (Canada). The first ever Wesak in Canada was held next year, in 1981, at the Nathan Phillips Square, a thousand happy troopers, braving the rain! A huge banner, 15 x 20 if not bigger, of a Buddha figure, kindly donated by the Vietnamese Hoa Nghiem Temple, was there welcoming them all.

¹ Watada, Terry, "Buddhism in Canada" <<http://www.bcc.ca/jodoshinshu/history.html>>.



On stage at the first Wesak Celebration (May 15, 1981) at Nathan Philips Square, Toronto City Hall, are, in the centre, Sensei Tsunoda, Bhante Dhammika, Bhante Punnaji and Sensei Fujikawa. To the far right is a representative of the Vietnamese Community who put up the painting of the Buddha in the background. To the very left is Suwanda H J Sugunasiri, Founding Coordinator of the Buddhist Federation of Toronto.

A first in North America, I'm told, it was. I'm happy to have introduced the term Wesak to Canada. Among those speaking at the event were Tsunoda Sensei of the Toronto Buddhist Church and Bhante Punnaji of the Toronto Mahavihara, also author of the *Buddhist Unity Song*, sung to guitar music by Brent Titcombe. Doing the initial flyer was Sujatha (Linda Klevnik) of the Zen Lotus Society. In subsequent years, the event was to be graced by, among others, the Ontario Minister of Citizenship, Bruce McCaffrey and the Mayor of Toronto Art Eggleton.

And today, Oct 10, again, we have come together for Buddhism Heritage Day.

Coincidence? It must have been with some prescience, then, that, making up the Buddhist holidays for the Multifaith Calendar in the nineties, I came to add a Founders Day. So perhaps we could continue the tradition of **Oct. 10 as Founders Day**.

The number of Buddhists in Canada has been on a steady increase: from 10407 in 1901 to 16175 in 1971 to 300345 in 2001 (Stats Can)², about a third of them right here in Toronto. The year 2013 appears to be a coming-of-age for Buddhism in Toronto. This year, for the first time, a 'Wesak Day' (May 24th, 2013) was formally declared by His Worship the Mayor of Toronto, Rob Ford. Then there was the Wesak at Queen's Park on May 25th. On June 1 was another historic event – the first ever Wesak in Mississauga. And finally today, Oct. 10, the very first hosting of Buddhists by an elected MPP, and within the Legislature building.

Allow me now to talk a bit about the Buddhist Council of Canada. Founded in 1985, it has five Objectives, the first two of them relating to working with Buddhist communities – locally and nationally:

² Beyer, Peter, "Buddhism in Canada: a Statistical Overview, 1981 to 2001", *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies*, Number Two, pp. 83-102.

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

Although Buddhists celebrating together inside the Legislature building today is a historic first, we have been ourselves, as noted, celebrating Wesak, in furtherance of the first two Objectives, on the South Lawn of Queen's Park, right here (where this very Legislature is located), since 2005, commemorating '100 Buddhism in Canada'.

Allow me then to take this opportunity to invite you for **Wesak 2014**, on Wednesday, **May 14th, 5 to 9 PM**, again at the same venue of Queen's Park,. You can watch the full moon rise around 7.15 PM from the comfort of the lawn! This year, **Wu De Fashih** of the Ching Kwok Temple, **Bhante Ahangama Ratanasiri** of the Toronto Mahavihara and **Yangil Sunim** of the Nine Mountains Zen Gate Society kindly agreed to Co-Chair our event. It is our hope that we could count on them again.

In fact, it may be said that it is in furtherance of goals 1 and 2 that we brought out the publication, *Thus Spake the Sangha: Early History of Buddhism in Toronto*³ featuring five of the earliest Sangha members:

- Kwang Ok Sunim of Bul Gwang Sa (Korean);
- Bhante Punnaji of the Toronto Mahavihara (Sinhala / Sri Lankan);
- Samu Sunim of Zen Lotus Society (Korean);
- Tsunoda Sensei of the Toronto Buddhist Church (Japanese), and
- Zasep Tulku Rimpoche of Gaden Cholin (Tibetan).

In these pages you will find their life stories as told by them in their own words.

In more recent times, the BCC has reached out to **Sakyadhita Canada** 'Daughters of the Buddha', a branch of Sakyadhita International, headed by Jayanta (Shirley Johannesen) <<http://www.sakyadhita.org/canada/about.html>>. It was also our pleasure to make contact with **Sati Saraniya**, the first Theravada Bhikkhuni Centre in Perth, Ontario, headed by founder Ayya Medhanandi Bhikkhuni <hermitage@satisaraniya.ca>.

It was also my pleasure in the eighties to interview *lay* Buddhist leaders in Toronto for the Multicultural History Society of Ontario.⁴

Our Objectives 3 to 5 relate to the wider society:

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.

³ Sugunasiri, Suwanda H J (Ed.) 2008, *Thus Spake the Sangha: Early History of Buddhism in Toronto*, Nalanda Publishing Canada.

⁴ See "Buddhists in Ontario 58. SUGUNASIRI, Suwanda H. J. Buddhist in Ontario **IN: (Polyphony: Bulletin of the Multicultural History Society of Ontario : Tenth Anniversary Issue)**. Fall/Winter, 1987. 9 (1). p. 78. Buddhists-Ontario" < <http://www.mhso.ca/docs/title.pdf>> and an interview with Sugunasiri (forthcoming).

It is in furtherance of these goals, then, that we had a Display, **Windows to Buddhism in the Academy** at Robarts Library, University of Toronto, this past July and August.



WINDOWS TO BUDDHISM IN THE ACADEMY

University of Toronto | Robarts Library
130 St. George Street | First Floor
July – August, 2013

Windows to Buddhism in the Academy is primarily a display of publications on Buddhism available at the University of Toronto Libraries in science, psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, literature, religion and women's studies. It thus prompts the viewer to see Buddhism beyond religion, temples and meditation.

Curated by Professor Suwanda H J Sugunasiri

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Windows to Buddhism in the Academy is slated to be held again in the months of **March-April, 2014**, to which again you're invited.⁵ Towards furthering the same goals, it was my pleasure and privilege some years earlier, in the nineties, to write a regular column in the *Toronto Star*, providing a Buddhist perspective on socioethical issues such as abortion, euthanasia, cloning, death and dying, homosexuality, etc.⁶ Preceding that in the eighties were the columns introducing Multiculturalism to Canadians.

Now to locate our recent Buddhist history in some historical perspective, it must be my good karma that I have lived to see the fruits of our collective labours. I remember how in the 1980's, 60 of us, of different ethnocultural and religious communities, appointed by Order in Council of

⁵ For details for all our events, you may visit www.buddhistcouncil.ca.

⁶ See Sugunasiri, Suwanda H J, *Embryo as Person: Buddhism, Bioethics and Society*, 2005, Toronto: Nalanda Publishing Canada.

the Government of Ontario, sat around a large table at the McDonald Block, in meeting after meeting, to advise the government on Multiculturalism. And we don't have to go far to see the fruits. It's right here in this room.

But we may not have been here today if not for yet another initiative. **In the beginning, Multiculturalism did not include religion.** Invited to a consultation in Ottawa by Secretary of State Dr. Noel Kinsella, we Interfaith leaders, six of us I believe, were unanimous that there is no culture without religion. And today, we see that formal recognition again, in this room. Had it not been for that advice, Buddhism would still be breathing only in the Ontario Cemeteries Act!⁷

We can be sure that the historic events of today will be recorded to posterity. For happily in this audience are chroniclers of Canadian Buddhism, Prof. Janet McLellan, author of *Many Petals of the Lotus*, and Prof. Mavis Fenn, writing on Sakyadhita. Witnessing history are also York University students of Prof. Veronique Tomaszewski, in her course, "Religion, Media, Culture". So thank you, Professors and students.

To conclude, then, I thank you all for being here, adding your happiness to the event. I'm happy to see the future of Canadian Buddhism right here, in the many young faces all around us.

Now to thank the two organizers behind today's successful event, **Bhante Dr. Saranapala**, you made history this year, celebrating Wesak in Mississauga for the first time. I congratulate you on it. I know what amount of hard work went into it. I've been there, organizing Wesak 1981 in Toronto. Today again you've shown your colours, helping MPP Damerla to make today's event the success that it is. I'm happy that in 2000 you accepted my invitation to be the Instructor in Pali at Nalanda College of Buddhist Studies (Canada). I've watched your growth from your student days up until you reached your goal and earned a PhD, all this while being Principal of the Sunday School at the West End Meditation Centre, raising funds to build the new temple, teaching meditation, and so on. I have every confidence that you will continue to put your energies into strengthening the voice of Buddhism in Canada for many years to come. Here's then wishing you the very best in all your endeavours, and in health and long life! *Sukhi dighayuko bhava!*

While our respected Sangha continue to do an excellent job within their own temples, and the Buddhist Council of Canada continues to do wider outreach, this is the first time that the twain have come together formally under one roof. And it should be no surprise that it has happened under political leadership. With no central authority, like e.g., a Pope, Buddhism has always flourished under the active sponsorship of Royalty, and government. Today's event then augurs well for the blossoming of Buddhism in Canada. We see an opportunity for unity. So we

⁷ For a comprehensive catalogue of Buddhist events in Canada, please visit <http://www.sumeru-books.com>. For a recent survey of Buddhist Temples and Organizations in Canada, see Negru, John, at <<http://www.sumeru-books.com/2013/02/highlights-from-the-survey-of-canadian-buddhist-organizations>>. For a study of 'Buddhism in Metropolitan Toronto' in 1989, see *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, XXI, No. 2, <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/browse?type=author&value=Sugunasiri%2C+Suwanda+H.J.&sort_by=2&order=ASC&rpp=20&etal=0>. For a recent publication on Canadian Buddhism, see *Wild Geese: Buddhism in Canada*, 2010, Eds: John Harding, Victor Hori & Alex Soucy, McGill-Queen's University Press.

invite all stakeholders – Sangha, laity and the political leadership, to grab the opportunity, as we look forward to working with them all. Allow me, then, in this context, to make **an appeal to the lay Buddhists in particular to rally around the Buddhist Council of Canada** to build a unified and strong Buddhist voice across Canada.

Respected MPP, and Parliamentary Assistant, **Dipika Damerla**, we at the Buddhist Council of Canada, look forward to working with you and the Government of Ontario, currently under the wise leadership of your Premier Kathleen Wynn. We hope we can rely on your support towards promoting, as in our goals, a happy, healthy and prosperous Ontario and Canada. While the Buddha does encourage making money, tut tut, in a fair manner, **happiness is the 'prime wealth'**. But it is health and well-being that allow us to make wealth, and be happy, enjoying what has been earned justly, and oh, by the way, without getting knee deep in debt.

Ms Damerla, Daughter of India, the land of the Buddha, and proudly Canadian, you've not only made history, but made Buddhists happy by building a bridge, thus accruing much merit. Perhaps it's best then that I shut up and put on my poetic hat.

WATERING A SOIL

For Dipika Damerla

(Ontario MPP, Mississauga East-Cooksville)

by Suwanda Sugunasiri

**There once was a fair MPP, ooh la la!
We know her name, don't we, Dipika Damerla,
Thought she how timely it would be
To serenade the Buddha for all to see.**

**Cherishing a memory of an age-old wisdom received
Watering, in a rich new soil, to see it bequeathed
A Teaching that's Timeless, Tested and True,
Joining hands with you, you and you.**

**So we're here in assembly today
To sing a song to you, sing hurray!
To a music in many a tongue
From around the globe far far flung.**

**Tolling the bells of Peace, setting 'em ring
Joining you, in unity, in hope, we sing:
Roll along Roll along Roll the Dhamma Wheel
Let us all unite to Roll the Dhamma Wheel!**

(in recognition of your initiative in sponsoring
Buddhism Heritage Day at the Ontario Legislature
Building on Oct 10 2013.)

*(Suwanda H J Sugunasiri is author of Poetry collections,
The Faces of Galle Face Green; Celestial Conversations; Obama-Ji,
& the novel, Untouchable Woman's Odyssey.)*

Thank you all again from Bryan, Usha and myself.

Wishing you all the best in health and happiness!