

Book Review



Flowers on the Rock: Global and Local Buddhisms in Canada

Edited by John S. Harding, Victor Sōgen Hori, and Alexander Soucy. Montreal and Kingston:

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Reviewed by Jeff Wilson, *University of Waterloo*

“The study of Buddhism in Canada is still in its infancy,” state the editors of *Flowers on the Rock*, and it is hard to dispute that assertion (3). Thankfully, though, the baby has at least been born, in no small part through the continuing efforts of John Harding, Victor Hori, Alexander Soucy, and the various contributors represented in this book. *Flowers on the Rock* is best understood as the second volume in a single work—the first volume being the editors’ book *Wild Geese: Buddhism in Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2011), which I reviewed for the *Journal of Global Buddhism* in 2011. That review praised the first volume but also noted some missing pieces, such as work on vipassana and a relative lack of attention to women. Both of those are covered in this second volume, along with many other fascinating topics.

I wish to state up front as a reviewer that I’m entangled in this project in various ways: I was invited to contribute to the 2010 conference from which this second volume was partially crafted (but had to decline due to a prior commitment); I was invited to contribute a chapter to *Flowers on the Rock* (but did not have an appropriate research project ready within the editors’ necessary timeframe); and one of the contributors (Fenn) is the chair of my department, another is a graduate of the PhD program that I run (Mitra, though I was not closely involved in his training), and I have intersected with others in various professional ways as well. Furthermore, certain essays in *Flowers on the Rock* respond directly (at times, critically) to my observations on the first volume, as we will see shortly. These are natural conditions when a new subfield is brought into the world: there are only a handful of midwives, and we must all work together or risk stillbirth. I pointed all of these out to the journal’s book review editor when I was

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approached to do this review, but was told to go ahead anyway. Given the impossibility of a fully neutral outside stance in these circumstances, I will drop that pretense and opt instead to locate my positionality overtly for the reader. Readers may wish to keep such connections—and the possible biases and blind spots that may flow from them—in mind as they consider this review.

The introduction to *Flowers on the Rock* rehearses what are by now familiar critiques of earlier models of scholarship, ones which centered on analyses of Buddhism in the United States by relying on dichotomies built around supposed ethnic/convert or traditionalist/modernist splits in the Buddhist community. This ground was already covered in Hori's essay in *Wild Geese*, and curiously, almost no examples of apparently flawed scholarship are cited in the advancement of this critique. The effect of these facts is a creeping feeling that a dead horse is perhaps being beaten, and I fear that this *may* mean that the criticism of weaknesses in these models is moving beyond careful dissection and reconsideration toward a new "political correctness" that rejects such models as improper for any researcher to work with. Although my own work has frequently been critical of the difficulties—and in some cases cultural prejudices—in much "two Buddhisms" scholarship, I would object to the establishment of it as taboo for three reasons. First, as a scholar I believe we need the freedom to pursue the theoretical lenses that seem best to each of us in relation to each specific project we undertake, and I am slow to support the implicit blacklisting of *any* theory. I am not certain that this is actually what the editors seek; rather, I raise it because it is one possible consequence of their line of argumentation. Second, dismissing such an approach out of hand risks failing to note the complexity of the historiographical record—for example, Charles Prebish's original comments about "two Buddhisms" in the United States have frequently been misconstrued in later decades. Third, while the "two Buddhisms" and related theses have their weaknesses, they also have their strengths. For example, while they *can* support uninvestigated racist or ethnocentric assumptions, they also have the ability to keep race and unequal power dynamics front and center in our analysis of Buddhism in Canada, a matter which I consider to be of vital importance. In other words, "two Buddhisms" and similar models can be used to subtly support white supremacy (I mean this in the technical sense derived from critical race and whiteness studies), but they can also be used to point out the presence and effects of white supremacy.

At any rate, to replace such dichotomous framings, the editors of *Flowers on the Rock* argue for an increasingly popular transnational perspective in religious studies. As they state, "We believe it is more helpful to organize and understand material on Buddhism in the West by using the interplay of global and local forces to better explore Buddhist transformations in, and beyond, Canada" (11). All of the contributors to the volume reflect this guiding principle in their essays in some fashion and prove it to be a fruitful perspective.

Alexander Soucy's first chapter takes as its launching point a response to my article "What is Canadian About Canadian Buddhism?" published in *Religion Compass* in 2011, which (among other things) critiqued his essay in *Wild Geese*. Unfortunately, Soucy's response seems to be arguing with some body of work other than that article (most likely, the earlier scholarship on American Buddhism, mentioned above), imputing

to research on Canadian Buddhism agendas it may not have—certainly my research does not. For example, he asserts (without providing sufficient evidence) that a Canadian chauvinist attitude may lurk in work on Canadian Buddhism, and that those who discuss Canadian Buddhism may be unaware of the larger networks in which Canadian Buddhism participates. Given that I am not a Canadian citizen, and the first page of my article states that “it should be taken as axiomatic that Canadian Buddhists share much with Buddhists elsewhere and are knit into larger global flows,” it is difficult to imagine that these critiques apply accurately to my essay. But since Soucy provides us with no examples of such misbehaving Canadian researchers, it is unclear precisely who in that case he is thinking of.

Soucy ends his essay: “We can also see that a third process takes place that localizes all Buddhism to local contexts—whether globalist, parochial, in Asia, or in the West. These forces are dynamic and relational, and are fundamental for understanding Buddhism in Canada today” (51). I quite agree; in fact, I think that readers will find that those local forces Soucy is discussing are precisely what my article attempts to point us toward, and furthermore that my work directly buttresses the approach that Soucy and his fellow editors wish us to take. So let me be clear that I appreciate Soucy’s theoretical approach and recommend it to other researchers. In fact, my only concern is that Soucy et. al. seem to have a preference for us to all study what he terms “Buddhist globalism,” whereas I believe that a balanced approach that does not overly privilege any level of interpretation at the expense of others is best, and therefore my gentle pushback has focused on theorizing what Soucy terms “Buddhist localism” (more on that momentarily) as a mild corrective—not in any way a repudiation.

Moving beyond the particulars of who may have misunderstood or misled whom, let us examine the framework in which Soucy wishes us to employ our study of Buddhism in Canada, as it is a useful structure that researchers would do well to consider. Soucy asserts that contemporary Buddhisms—regardless of their location in Asia, the West, or elsewhere—are subject to three mutually interacting forces. These he labels Buddhist globalism, Buddhist parochialism, and Buddhist localism. Buddhist localism constitutes the forces or processes that situate any given Buddhism in its surrounding context. Buddhist parochialism is perhaps the most original of Soucy’s terms. He is very clear that he is using the term in a technical sense, without the pejorative connotation of everyday usage, and hopefully it will be used responsibly by other future researchers. What he means by this is “an inward looking or conservative predilection,” with a focus on the community (39). Buddhists affected by or expressing such orientations are typically not deeply interested in the reformist discourses that occur in Buddhist globalism, and if they are immigrants to Canada, they seek to recreate Buddhism as they have experienced it, rather than focusing on innovation.

This Buddhist parochialism interacts with Buddhist globalism (which is in some ways its opposite). Since this is his preferred angle of interpretation, Soucy spends the most time explaining his approach to Buddhist globalism. He provides a list of four common attributes that are often found—all or in some combination—in movements/practitioners that might be described as participating in Buddhist globalism. These are: 1) an outward looking orientation, interested in international, inter-sectarian,

and inter-religious communication; 2) the construction of Buddhism as a so-called “world religion”; 3) the assertion of Buddhism as modern; and 4) greater stress on the individual and their practice, rather than on the community. Soucy uses a number of examples, especially Vietnamese Buddhism in multiple countries and iterations, to illustrate his points. The most important takeaway is that these three different forces constantly interact with one another, manifesting in different combinations in different times and places. Naturally, at this early stage of development there is considerable room for further elaboration and complication of this framework, but as a theoretical foundation for future studies of Buddhism in Canada (or, really, anywhere), it should serve ably. Soucy cites earlier work of Thomas Tweed; a more recent (2011) essay by Tweed in the *Journal of Global Buddhism*—“Theory and Methods in the Study of Buddhism: Toward ‘Translocative’ Analysis”—can also be recommended for further consideration of the intersection of perspectives at varying levels of scale, from global to local.

After these opening overview or theoretical essays, the other chapters of the book are case studies of Buddhism in Canada, organized around particular groups, issues, or individuals. They are divided into three sections; the first section, “Taking Root,” is historically minded, tracing the past and present manifestations of various groups. Michihiro Ama opens this section with a look at conflict in early Canadian Jōdo Shinshū groups. His chapter somewhat recapitulates his important monograph *Immigrants to the Pure Land* (2011), but with a much greater focus specifically on the Canadian aspects of his story, including some very good detail. He finds that such conflicts arose from multiple factors, including “the socio-political constraints placed upon the Japanese by the host nation, economic instability, conflicts of interest both at the individual and group levels, and cultural practices of the *issei* immigrants linked to their provincial identities” (56).

Kory Goldberg’s chapter on the Goenka movement provides a nice overview of the vipassana teacher’s biography, teachings, and international practice network. Less attention is paid to its actual manifestations in Canada, but he does note that interviews with Canadian practitioners indicate that specific aspects of the movement draw them in: “universalism, secularism, rationality, scientific objectivity, individualism, stress reduction, and egalitarianism” (80). Goldberg believes that Goenka came to emphasize these themes in part because he was a non-Buddhist (Hindu) teaching Buddhist meditation in a non-Buddhist culture (India). As such he offers a highly useful parallel to the situation of meditation movements (and Buddhism generally) in Canada, where we also find a non-Buddhist culture and where many teachers are ambivalent about Buddhist identity or claim fellowship with non-Buddhist religions.

Whereas Goldberg examines de-monasticized meditation, James Placzek’s essay looks at the establishment of a Theravāda forest monastery in British Columbia. Placzek helpfully traces the subtle nature of alternating Sri Lankan, Thai, and Western influences on the monastery. He also spends considerable time discussing a crisis in the Thai Forest Tradition that arose over *bhikkhuni* ordination. This is an interesting and important topic in its own right, but the length of discussion of it in the chapter does not seem to be fully justified by the low level of impact that it is depicted as having in British Columbia specifically.

Many contributions to *Flowers on the Rock*, such as Jackie Larm's chapter on Thragu Monastery, are examples of insider scholarship. A member of the monastery's support community, as well as a fieldwork researcher, Larm uses her experiences and access at the monastery to explore how the concept of "tradition" is deployed and understood by different attendees. As she smartly puts it, "One of the chosen methods for [Thragu Monastery's] adaption to the Canadian environment is through instilling a sense of the traditional" (147). While she does not employ the terms, her field site very clearly demonstrates the pulls of various Buddhist global, parochial, and local forces (to borrow Soucy's framework).

Paul Crowe does not position himself as an insider, but does provide an activist tenor to his study of Chinese temples in Vancouver. In a brief but excellent discussion, he shows how typical narratives of language-loss and assimilation are likely to prove incorrect in the case of Vancouver's Chinese-descended inhabitants, significant numbers of whom circulate in linguistic and cultural "islands" that mitigate assimilationist pressures. Crowe's discussion of migration dynamics and language transmission bolsters Peter Beyer's observation in *Wild Geese* that Canadian Buddhism has a significantly more Chinese character than Buddhism in the United States. Crowe also takes issue with conservative critics of Canadian multicultural policies who contend that such policies are eroding a sense of shared Canadian identity, primarily by allegedly encouraging newer immigrants to import "backwards" mores and practices that conflict with enlightened Canadian values.

In my review of *Wild Geese* I suggested that there had been relatively few sex scandals in Canadian Buddhism (though not none, to be sure). Victor Hori takes up the topic for his chapter, which is concerned with elucidating a) why meditation centers have been scandal-prone and b) why monasteries are relatively scandal-free. To accomplish this, he lays out a three-part system of ideal type Buddhist institutions: the temple, the meditation center, and the monastery. Temples serve as ritual providers for the local community and are not significantly treated in his essay. Meditation centers typically have a strong leader but little clear hierarchy among their students, who are often non-residential and are not expected to adhere to celibacy, much less the full *vinaya* rules. Monasteries are full residential training sites, with ordained monastics who attempt to follow the *vinaya* and make diligent Buddhist practice the center of their lives, rather than one aspect among various competing priorities. Exceptions and complications spring to mind almost immediately, including some among the examples that Hori draws upon, but as basic ideal types they do serve to illuminate some trends in organizational structure and mission, and accompanying levels of risk related to sex and power abuses. Hori asserts that the mixing of the genders in meditation centers, the lack of adherence to Buddhist models of celibate monastic lifestyle, and the lack of peer pressure among students toward maintaining proper behavior are factors that distinguish meditation centers from monasteries and make them far more likely to exhibit dysfunction and scandal.

The essay could have been served by a stronger focus on Canadian examples of meditation center scandal (none are explored in depth), and Hori has a tendency to lay blame upon Western students for not stopping the abuses in their midst, without

discussing the role of the Japanese Zen leader in setting up, maintaining, and manipulating the power structures and rules for the meditation center that result in a high risk of abuse. Another problem is that temples and monasteries run by ostensibly celibate monks and nuns (in most cases, immigrants from Asian nations) in the United States have also been rife with sexual abuses of both junior monastics and laypeople. I know of many such examples, almost none of which have received public attention in the way of meditation center scandals, perhaps because the victims have primarily been non-white and in many cases communities have successfully conspired to hide their dirty laundry from the outside public (one common tactic has been to send the offending monk back to Asia before the English-language press catches wind of the scandal; sometimes, the victim is silenced by being sent away, too). Until we have a full investigation that tracks the actual number of abuses occurring and how they correlate to institutional organization, it will be difficult to make firm pronouncements. But Hori's observations are suggestive and bear further research that might support or complicate his hypothesis.

The second section of the book is called "Communicating the Dharma." As strong as many of the entries in the first section are, I felt this second section was truly outstanding, with significant work presented in every chapter. To begin, Mitra Barua draws on his dissertation research to examine how Sri Lankan temples in Toronto teach Buddhism to children. His discussion is very thorough, with special attention paid to how Dhamma School programs intentionally promote multiculturalism in order to shape their charges into good Canadians. Although he does not raise the issue explicitly, this presents an interesting contrast to the prominent ethnochauvinist currents found in much contemporary Sri Lankan Theravāda. Mitra's work would benefit from a follow-up project that interviews children to discover how they receive and understand the messages that adults (the focus of this chapter) are conveying, but given the space limitations of the chapter (and the inherent ethical difficulties of child research), this is hardly an unexpected omission.

Angela Sumegi presents a sophisticated, sensitive autoethnography of the creation of several Canadian Buddhist memorial rituals that she performed. I will admit to a natural skepticism about this method in the abstract, but the success of this chapter is compelling and suggests that such full-throated insider scholarship should not be dismissed out of hand. Reflecting on her experiences, Sumegi is able to convey from the inside the presence of two competing tensions in the creation of such rituals: 1) the need to ensure that the ritual is sufficiently Buddhist so as to be meaningful and effective, and 2) the need to make the ritual generic or open enough so as to allow non-Buddhists to meaningfully participate in it. This is useful information for us all.

Paul McIvor's chapter focuses on Buddhist prison ministry in Canada. McIvor (a prison volunteer himself) divides his essay into two parts, focusing first on describing how prison ministries operate, and then turning to a sociological analysis of motivations that inspire Buddhist prison work. His observations suggest that identity formation issues are a strong element of volunteerism, as prison work validates a sense of oneself as heroic and altruistic, and legitimates the practitioner's choice to pursue Buddhist practice.

Moving in a different direction, Melissa Anne-Marie Curley offers a reading of the Buddhist aspects of the renegade artistic movement Fluxus. With its questionably Buddhist subject matter, precious art world environment, and limited Canadian content, I was frankly prepared to hate this chapter; but I was left eating crow by what turned out to be my favorite essay in the entire book. Curley convincingly argues for appreciation of how Buddhist influences operated in the Fluxus art movement, which was concerned with mail art and other forms of performance that highlighted the interconnected relations between persons and things, rather than static art objects or exhibitions. Major figures in the movement, such as the composer John Cage and the post-avant-garde French thinker Robert Filliou, were inspired by contacts with Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, though many artists associated with Fluxus were not full-blown Buddhist practitioners.

For Curley, the Buddhist influence on Fluxus manifests most clearly in three ways, all of which were central concepts for the movement's participants: the appreciation of silence for its subversive and healing potentiality; the virtue of decentering the self and mitigating the egoistic tendencies in the creation of art; and the stress on interdependent co-origination of art (and by extension, all aspects of human society and the world), most clearly enunciated through the group's concept of the Eternal Network. Though Fluxus originated outside of Canada, Vancouver became an especially important node in the overall network—in part, Curley suggests—because a decentered philosophy especially fit the needs of a community that was both geographically peripheral to the global powerhouse centers of the art world and existed at the far edge of the Canadian art world as well. I found Curley's comments on how Fluxus research helps us examine moments when “North American Buddhism [was] different from itself” especially intriguing: suddenly seemingly familiar story lines around Buddhism and sexual orientation, ecology, and adaption are thrown into different light (285). We need more research that is willing to take risks such as this essay does.

The final chapter in this section, by Sarah Haynes, looks at the changing portrayals of Tibet through monastic dance performances, visual art, and film. Haynes is particularly attendant to how the political realities of Tibetan occupation and diaspora are ever-present pressures that artists and performers must wrestle with, often forcing choices leading either to self-exotification via a neo-traditionalism or ostracism via an anti-traditionalist trajectory.

Flowers on the Rock ends with a section of biographies related to key figures in Canadian Buddhism. Mavis Fenn writes about Dhammadina and Jayantā, two important female Theravāda teachers, Alexander Soucy describes Thầy Phổ Tịnh, a Vietnamese nun active in Montreal, and John Harding covers Leslie Kawamura, a pivotal figure both for Canadian Jōdo Shinshū and for Buddhist Studies in North America. These essays could be seen as having a tendency toward hagiography; though, on the other hand, the accomplishments of these individuals are objectively impressive. Furthermore, even though primarily descriptive, the final chapters do contain important observations and notes of analysis. For example, Soucy uses his essay to demonstrate how Asian and Asian-Canadian women are active agents in negotiating their community status and carrying on the work of Buddhist instruction. Rather than asserting the final word on their subjects, these chapters tend to inform while also provoking questions for further

research: for example, Harding's discussion of Kawamura's Beat connections is intriguing but not complete, and thus presents a ripe opportunity for additional work.

In summation, *Flowers on the Rock* provides a wealth of riches for those who study contemporary Buddhism, whether their focus is Canada, specifically, or other aspects of the globalized Buddhacape (to coin a term, with apologies to Arjun Appadurai). We have here useful theoretical suggestions, solid information on a diversity of topics, a multitude of perspectival approaches, and new pathways that can be followed for future research. Together with *Wild Geese*, this volume has helped advance the study of Canadian Buddhism tremendously, and the editors' ongoing project investigating global Buddhism promises yet more to come. *Flowers on the Rock* is required reading for all scholars working in this area; it is also appropriate material for adoption into an array of different courses, including Religious Studies, Women's Studies, Ethnic Studies, and Canadian History.