

Final Report: Research Stay at University of British Columbia

Robekkah Ritchie

PhD candidate in the department of the Scientific Study of Religion

Freie Universität Berlin

Exploring Buddhist Sustainability Practices in Canada: A Case Study of Birken  
Forest Monastery.

November-December 2019



My doctoral thesis is based on fieldwork in Thailand of the Buddhist “Santi Asoke” group; they are unique for many reasons however they are well known for their development of sustainable “ecovillages” and their own economic system based on “merit” and generosity. Interestingly, the goals of the Asoke group overlap with many of the “17 Sustainable Development Goals.” Because my research interests include contemporary Buddhist practice and sustainability, the University Alliance for Sustainability call for research stay applications was the perfect opportunity to expand the themes of my work as well as network with likeminded scholars. UBC was my university of choice partially due to their Asian Studies department, which is the foremost institute of its kind nationally, and is well-known and respected internationally. Within the Asian Studies department, The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation in Buddhism and Contemporary Society, established in 2006, was the first program devoted to the study of modern and contemporary Buddhism in North America.

The Asian Studies department is also known for their sustainability initiatives. An exciting and unexpected feature of my stay in UBC also overlapped with sustainable topics as I was offered a working space in the well-known C. K. Choi Building. This building, on the UBC campus, houses the Institute of Asian Research and was the first green building at a public institution in British Columbia.

Another prominent aspect of my choosing UBC is that my case study for this project was based on a “green” off-grid Buddhist monastery located in British Columbia and is run almost entirely off of renewable energy . The goal of my project was to explore the relationship between sustainability and Buddhism through the contemporary implementation of methods in Birken Forest Monastery. Birken Forest Buddhist Monastery is a Canadian Theravada Buddhist monastery (in the Thai Forest Tradition of Ajahn Chah) headed by Ajahn Sona, and since 2001 has been located near Kamloops, British Columbia. The Thai Forest Tradition has a long history of environmental activism, and this has translated into Western settings, though with a drastically different climate, this comes with an array of different challenges.

There are few opportunities to study Buddhism, especially in contemporary contexts, and scholars at UBC as well as the neighboring Simon Fraser University in Vancouver proved to be a valuable resource for networking and sharing information. Prof. Jessica L. Main, who is also the chair of the Buddhism and Contemporary Society Program at UBC, had agreed to be my contact person at UBC. Prof. Main’s research focuses on Socially engaged Buddhism and social ethics and her insights and contacts to other professors was invaluable during my stay. A highlight of my stay was being able to attend a joint meeting of Prof. Jessica Main, Prof. Karen Ferguson, Prof. Luke Clossey and PhD student Casey Collins, who has similar research interests to myself. Prof. Karen Ferguson and Prof. Luke Clossey both work at SFU and have been engaged with a project focusing on the history of Birken Forest Monastery. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of my work, and the many relevant contact persons within UBC and SFU in different departments, I was given the opportunity to develop networks between scholars in these institutions and the Freie Universität.

During my time in Vancouver, the Buddhism and Contemporary Society Program at UBC also hosted relevant presentations and lectures. For example visiting Assistant Professor Cuilan Liu from the University of Pittsburgh presented “Clerical Privileges and the Jurisdiction of the Buddhist Clergy: Do They Exist?” Further, Rey-Sheng Her, a visiting scholar at Columbia University and Associate Professor at National Chengchi University gave a guest lecture entitled: “Through Altruism to Enlightenment.” Further, facilities within the UBC campus also provided value to my trip—such as the well-known and expansive Asian Library.

Through this experience, I was able to expand upon my area of expertise (study of contemporary Theravada Buddhism) within new contexts and time at UBC was a valuable because of their Buddhist Studies program as well as the knowledgeable scholars in related fields in other departments, and the proximity to other researchers at SFU. The University Alliance for Sustainability exchange not only related to my previous work but has allowed me to move forward in utilizing and applying my skills on related research topics.