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## The Bangkok Conference on Buddhist Studies

An international conference on the state of the field of Buddhist studies during the past twenty-five years was held at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand, from December 16-18, 1997. The Center was founded in 1992 with the purpose of stimulating research in various aspects of Buddhism – textual, doctrinal, and empirical. To promote these goals both nationally and internationally the Center publishes a journal, *Phutasāsanasu'ksā* (Buddhist Studies), offers lecture series in both English and Thai, and has been instrumental in founding an M.A. in Buddhist Studies at Chulalongkorn University open to international and Thai students.

The conference was organized by Dr. Wit Wisadavet, Director of the University's Center for Buddhist Studies. Eleven countries were represented – Canada, England, France, Germany, India, Japan, Korea, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and the United States. Conference papers were presented by Bruce Matthews, Acadia University; Richard Gombrich, Oxford University; Louis Gabaude, École Française d'Extrême-Orient; Eli Franco, Hamburg University; Sanghasena Singh, University of Delhi; Kiyotaka Kimura, Tokyo University; Jae-ryong Shim, Seoul National University; Than Thun, Yangon University; Asanga Tilakaratne, Post-Graduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies; Somparn Promta, Chulalongkorn University; and Frank E. Reynolds, University of Chicago. Yijie Tang, Beijing University, who prepared a conference paper, was unable to attend. Although the conference had broad international representation, greater attention was given to Indic, Theravāda, South and Southeast Asian Buddhist traditions with particular attention to textual studies as stipulated in the conference guidelines. While scholars from some countries, for example, Belgium, Switzerland, and Austria, were not represented at the conference, Buddhist studies in these countries were included in the papers prepared by Gabaude and Franco. For various circumstantial reasons, several nations, notably Australia, New Zealand, Italy, and Russia, were absent. For this reason the forthcoming volume of conference proceedings

represents a selective rather than an inclusive review of the state of Buddhist studies internationally.

Each conference paper included substantial information regarding the state of Buddhist studies in that country. The Center will publish the proceedings in Thailand, and plans are underway to establish a web site where they will also be made available. Collectively the papers constitute an important body of bibliographic and descriptive information. They also reveal substantive disagreement regarding the nature and method of Buddhist studies among different countries. Three different approaches to the study of Buddhism defined the conference debates: (1) the study of Buddhism as an empirical, objective, critical, scientific field of inquiry grounded in the texts, languages, and traditions of a particular, historical field of study, especially the history of ideas; (2) Buddhist studies as an examination of Buddhist texts and traditions by adherents of the tradition or scholars who approach the study of Buddhism primarily from the perspective of its normative truth claims; (3) Buddhist studies as a dynamic, methodologically eclectic, and context-sensitive field that includes descriptive, analytical, and comparative approaches to a broad range of subjects including texts and rituals and with increasing attention being given to the non-elite or popular lived/living tradition. The conference presentations and discussions demonstrated that the differences among these approaches are not absolute and frequently intersect both within and among particular countries. To the degree that each of these orientations to the study of Buddhism was represented by the conference presentations, the first is most closely identified with the academic traditions of England and Germany, the second with the Buddhist countries of Asia, and the third with the United States and Canada. The French speaking world has had a strong tradition of historical and textual studies and the work of Paul Mus, in particular, has had a strong influence on the Chicago school of the history of religions. It should be emphasized that these distinctions are fluid and imprecise, for example, Japan and Sri Lanka have adopted the European and British tradition of Buddhist studies, thereby problematizing any facile characterization of the study of Buddhism either in general or within a particular country. Obviously, like any field of inquiry, Buddhist Studies is not static. It continues to evolve with new historical data as well as the development of new methodologies including the important impact of computer technology. Several of the conferees voiced their deep concern about the increasing threat to historical evidence including both texts and

artifacts, and the negative impact of an increasingly commercialized global ethos on support for Buddhist studies.

The following papers by Eli Franco and Frank E. Reynolds each offer a valuable survey of the development of Buddhist studies over the past twenty-five years in Germany and the United States, respectively. Omitted from Franco's paper is an appended extensive bibliography that will be included in the published volume. Among the many excellent papers that will constitute the conference proceedings, the two included here offer an insight into differing approaches to the field of Buddhist studies debated at the conference.