

## **BIOS OF PARTICIPANTS at Buddhist Literary Festival Canada 2021**

### **PROPOSER**

US Fulbright Scholar **Ven Prof Bhikkhu Mihita** (PhD, MA, MEd (U of Toronto), MA (Philadelphia), BA (London)), in his lay name of Suwanda H J Sugunasiri, is author of the novel *Untouchable Woman's Odyssey* and 3 collections of poetry, featured at the Toronto Harbourfront Reading Series. Play Director and Dancer, his lit crit collected works is titled *Step Down Shakespeare, the Stone Angel is Here*. Pioneering researcher of the *Literature of Canadians of South Asian Origins* for the Multiculturalism Directorate, Government of Canada, published under the title, *The Search for Meaning*, he is featured in *Canadian Encyclopedia on Literature*, and *Dimensions II: precise thought and language in the Essay*.

Pioneering Multicultural Literature into the Canadian classroom, he was a *Toronto Star* Columnist introducing Multiculturalism to Canadians, later providing a Buddhist perspective on contemporary Bioethical issues (abortion euthanasia, homosexuality, cloning, etc.). Active in Buddhist-Christian Dialogue and Interfaith relations, serving on the Ontario Provincial Interfaith Council on Chaplaincy and appointed to the Ontario Advisory Council on Multiculturalism and Citizenship, he has been a regular on Radio and TV (CBC, CFRB, CFTO, OMNI, TVO, Vision TV, 100 Huntley St).

Founding Coordinator of the Buddhist Federation of Toronto in 1980, he sought to facilitate the establishment of Buddhism on Canadian soil, becoming as well the Buddhist spokesman, and currently on the U of Toronto Bluebook for the Media. Founder and Editor Emeritus, *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies*, and Founder of Nalanda College of Buddhist Studies, he is the author of several books and articles on Buddhism. Visiting Professor on Buddhism at the University of Havana (2010; 2017), he was ordained in Cuba in 2018, introducing Theravada Buddhism as well. He is featured in *Wild Geese: Buddhism in Canada* (McGill U Press), *Canadian Who's Who*, *Canada at the Millennium*, and June Callwood's *National Treasure*.

### **PRESENTERS**

#### **Martin Adam**

My area of research specialization is Indian Buddhism, with more general interests in other south Asian religious traditions (Hinduism, Jainism). I received my PhD from McGill University in 2003. My studies have included extended periods at institutions in India, Nepal, and Switzerland. A recent study leave included periods at McGill's Faculty of Religious Studies and Oxford's Wolfson College, where I was conducting research in the area of early Indian Buddhist Metaethics. My present duties at UVIC include serving as the Director of the Religious Studies Program. My teaching duties are split between Religious Studies and the Pacific and Asian Studies Department.

### **Glen Choi, PhD**

Glen Choi was born in Toronto, Canada to Korean immigrant parents, spent his 20s and early 30s studying and working in South Korea, and returned to Canada in 2005. He currently teaches humanities/social sciences at a college in Toronto. A lifelong Buddhist, he received his Ph.D. in Religious Studies ("Buddhism in the West") from the University of Ottawa and an M.A. in Seon (Zen) Studies from Dongguk University in Seoul. His writing has appeared in publications from South Korea to the United States and Canada. Glen also hosted a 12-part TV documentary series on Buddhism in Canada called "Path to Enlightenment."

### **Upāsikā Eleanor, PhD**

Upāsikā Eleanor, PhD (a.k.a. Dr. Eleanor Pontoriero) has been a practicing Buddhist since 1985. She took formal refuge and lay precepts in the Mahayana, then the Theravada. She continues daily and formal dhamma practice, and retreats with both monastic and lay teachers in the Ajahn Chah and Sayadaw U Pandita lineages in the international and local contexts. She continues to engage in sutta and dhamma study and Pali with Theravada monastic and lay teachers. She is a longtime member of the board and steering committee, and facilitator with the Theravada Buddhist Community in Toronto. Currently, she facilitates a weekly guided meditation and dhamma study. She is also a longtime member, elder, kalyanamitta and facilitator with Satipanna Insight Meditation Toronto, and a member of the Ottawa Buddhist Society, Canada.

Since 2002, she has taught religious ethics, women, human rights, and peacebuilding in comparative context at the University of Toronto. She is a certified facilitator in secular mindfulness and integrates mindfulness practices in contemplative interfaith contexts with a focus on social justice. She mentors youth groups engaged in UN and UN Women grassroots projects for peace, equity, and development locally and globally. She also participates in intra- and inter- faith dialogue, including the Parliament of World Religions. Upāsikā Eleanor is a member of Buddhist-Christian Studies, and Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women. As a not-for-profit endeavor, she guides devotional, contemplative, and meditative practices in Buddhist and interfaith contexts in the community.

### **Sachini Jayewardene**

Sachini Jayewardene is a grade eight student at the Mihindu Dhamma School in Brampton affiliated with the Brampton Buddhist Mission Centre in Caledon.

### **Bryan Levman, PhD**

Bryan Levman teaches Pali at the University of Toronto's Department of Religion, specializing in the early language of Buddhism. He has a BA in English Language and Literature, an MSc in Geology and a doctorate in Religion from the University of Toronto. He is the author of over 25 articles, and two books.

## **John Negru**

John Harvey Negru is Founder and CEO at The Sumeru Press, Canada's largest independent Buddhist book publisher. He has been involved in many Buddhist community development projects and environmental causes over the past 50 years, and has been a technological design educator for more than 25 years.

## **Ajahn Punnadhammo**

Ajahn Punnadhammo is a Bhikkhu in the Thai Forest Tradition of Ajahn Chah. He was born Michael Dominsky in Toronto in 1955. He started studying and practising Buddhism in 1979 and ordained as a Bhikkhu in Thailand in 1992. From 1996, He has been the Abbot of the Arrow River Forest Hermitage near Thunder Bay, Ontario.

## **Vanessa R. Sasson, PhD**

Vanessa R. Sasson is a professor of Religious Studies in the Liberal Arts Department of Marianopolis College where she has been teaching since 1999. She is also a Research Fellow at the University of the Free State and Research Member at CERIAS at UQAM. She has published a number of articles and book chapters, and is the author and or editor of a number of academic volumes, most recently *Jewels, Jewelry, and Other Shiny Things in the Buddhist Imaginary* (University of Hawaii Press, 2021). *Yasodhara and the Buddha* (Bloomsbury, 2021) is her first novel. She is currently working on the sequel.

## **Henry Shiu, PhD**

Dr. Henry Shiu is the inaugural Shi Wu De Professor in Chinese Buddhist Studies at Emmanuel College of Victoria University, University of Toronto. His area of research specialization lies in the theory of the *tathāgatagarbha* or Buddha nature, and he has also focused his studies on Mahāyāna Buddhism in India, China, and Tibet, particularly on the historical and doctrinal development of the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra traditions. Other research interests of Shiu includes contemporary Engaged Buddhist movements, Buddhist Chaplaincy, Buddhism in Canada, and Western classical music.

## **Jim Vuylsteke**

Jim Vuylsteke grew up in London, Ontario, and now lives in the West end of Toronto. Graduating from Carleton University in Ottawa, with a Bachelor of Science, he became a monk at the age of 37 with the Aukana Trust in the UK. On his return to Canada as a layman, he spent time at Nalanda College of Buddhist Studies, helping with administration, editing books and instructing. He currently leads the Toronto Insight Meditation Centre, and employed as a business analyst in a Canadian retail company.

## **Terry Watada**

Terry Watada is the author of *Bukkyo Tozen: A History of Jodo Shinshu Buddhism in Canada, 1905 – 1995*, the first of its kind. Since then he has published three novels, five poetry collections, a collection of short stories and various other books. *Mysterious Dreams of the Dead* (novel) and *The Four Sufferings* (poetry) were released simultaneously in December 2020. At present, he is working on a fourth novel, a sixth poetry collection, and a new play for presentation at the Port Dover Summer Theatre Festival. For *Hiroshima Bomb Money* (his 4<sup>th</sup> novel), he received a Toronto Arts Council Writing Grant in support.

## **Asoka Weerasinghe**

Originally from Sri Lanka, Asoka Weerasinghe is an Award winning published poet with 25 collections of poetry to his credit, now domiciled in Ottawa, Canada. He was the guest poet at the International Poetry Festival in Austin Texas, and *The Poet-in-Residence* at the Dylan Thomas Word and Song Festival in Swansea, Wales.