

Metro Buddhists to celebrate birth of Enlightened One

Metro Buddhists will gather at the Hong Fa Temple on Bloor St. W. this Saturday to celebrate "Wesak," the Buddhist observance of the birth, enlightenment and death of Buddha (Enlightened One) Siddhartha Gautama.

The affair will consist of an afternoon program of traditional chants, selected readings of Buddhist teachings, folklore, entertainment and refreshments. Traditionally, Wesak is observed on the full moon in May, but in Canada it's celebrated on a weekend for convenience.

Buddhism is one of the major religions of the world, with more than 230 million followers in various sects from Sri Lanka and Viet Nam to Tibet, Korea, China, India and Japan. In Canada, there are an estimated 250,000 Buddhists and in Metro alone, there are 80,000 followers.

Constant cycle

The Wesak affair is sponsored by the Buddhist Council of Canada, a Toronto-based national organization designed to bring Buddhists of diverse cultural origins under one umbrella organization to make Buddhist ways more accessible to mainstream Canadians.

According to the *Yearbook of Canada 1988*, Buddhism is the fastest growing religion in the country, says council president Suwanda Sugunasiri, a Toronto teacher who specializes in English

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Roots



as a second language.

Canadians of Anglo-Saxon and Jewish backgrounds are embracing Buddhist ways in increasing numbers, he says.

Buddha founded the religion in India about 2,500 years ago, teaching that existence is a constant cycle of death and rebirth and each person's well-being in the next life is determined by his behavior in the current one.

He also taught that self-purification is the path to enlightenment, or the attainment of "Nirvana"; the only way to break the cycle is to end all attachment to worldly goods and desires. Buddhists believe that, in attaining Nirvana, all desire is put aside — including the desire to live again. Hence, the process of rebirth comes to an end. Literally, Nirvana means "blowing out" — as in blowing out the spark of desire.

"Even the desire for Nirvana may be an obstacle to it," says Sugunasiri, 53.

Born in Sri Lanka, Sugunasiri studied at the University of Michigan and the University of Pennsylvania, came to Canada in

1967 and obtained a Ph.D. in education from the University of Toronto.

Sugunasiri, who writes fiction and poetry in his spare time, says Buddhists don't go around trying to win converts. It took 2,500 years for Buddhism to take hold in North America, he says, "so what's the hurry?"

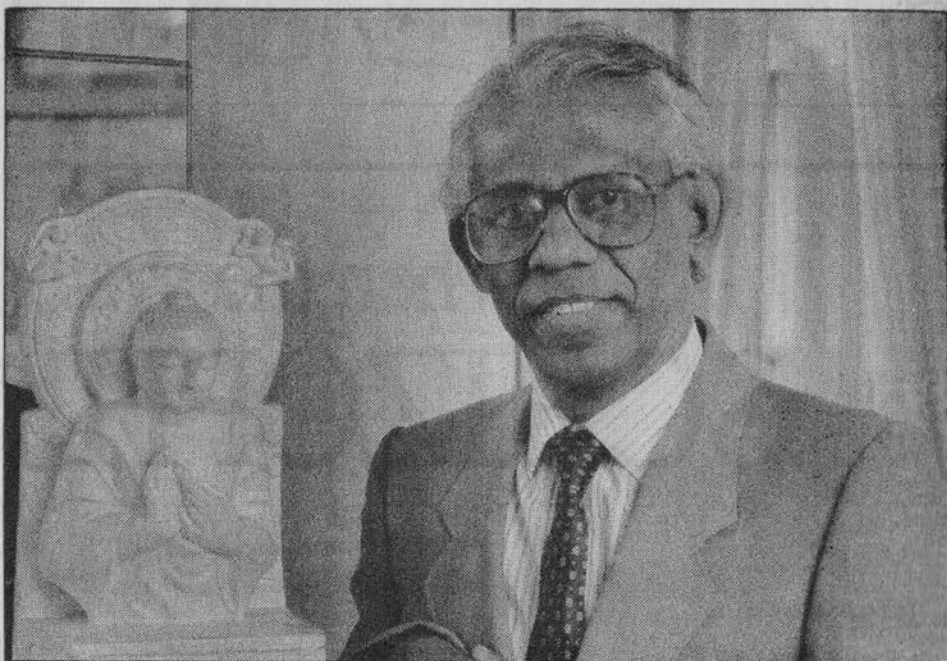
Diverse cultures

But, he believes, if Canadians embraced Buddhism "we'd become a more flexible, more honest, wiser society."

Buddhists decide for themselves what disciplines to observe. Thus, some lead more disciplined lives than others. "There's nothing wrong for a Buddhist to be wealthy, provided it's gained honestly and used for good purposes. People suffer stress, anger, illness and other ailments because they cling to their possessions and crave for more and more," he says.

In taking the helm of the Buddhist umbrella-group, Sugunasiri's goal is to get Buddhists in Canada of diverse cultures to focus on the teachings of the Buddha and thus identify cultural trappings which have become part of Buddhist lifestyles in their homelands.

"Canada provides the opportunity for Buddhists of different cultures to cut through all the cultural manifestations and see the commonality of Buddhism."



FRANK LENNON/TORONTO STAR

BUDDHA'S FOLLOWER: Suwanda Sugunasiri, president of the Buddhist Council of Canada, says if Canadians embraced Buddhism "we'd become a more honest, wiser society."

he says.

In Canada, Buddhism must be nurtured in the way it's developed in the various countries around the world. Hence, a Buddhist lifestyle here should develop within a Canadian cultural framework — rather than that of other lands, he says. "This is indeed not to argue for abandoning tradition or having uniformity of practice, nor modifying the fundamentals of Buddhism, but simply to remind ourselves of the need of Buddhism

to acculturate itself to Canada, the same way Buddhism has acculturated itself historically in different countries.

"Without this, Buddhism will remain a quaint but irrelevant religion, not only to the second generation but to the average native-born Canadian who must ultimately be responsible for the development of Buddhism in this country."

Reverence to the statue of the Buddha must not be mistaken for

idol worship, says Sugunasiri. Buddhists do not believe in a deity or supernatural life. There is no all-knowing God in Buddhist beliefs.

Buddhism teaches that in the rebirth process, energies of those who die search and link with compatible energies of a new birth "as a key finding a suitable keyhole. . .," explains Sugunasiri. "What is reborn is neither the same nor quite another. Nothing in the universe is ever lost."