THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF
BUDDHIST PRACTICE

Edited by
PAULA ARAI and KEVIN TRAINOR

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
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Sallie King (Routledge, 2021); “Buddhism: Confronting the Harmful with Compassion,”
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: EMBODIMENT AND SENSE EXPERIENCE

PAULA ARAI AND KEVIN TRAINOR

SITUATING PRACTICE IN THE FIELD OF BUDDHIST STUDIES

Why a handbook of Buddhist practice? During the past half century, the academic study of religion in Europe and North America has undergone significant change. Well into the twentieth century, it was rooted in assumptions about human religiosity characteristic of the prevailing impulses in Western civilization, with a focus on textual, philosophical, and historical developments in the major monotheistic traditions. This orientation provided the broad framework within which all religious traditions were studied and understood, and indeed what counted as worthy of study. Toward the latter half of the twentieth century, however, the field expanded as more voices and orientations were included within the scope of scholarly inquiry. Approaches that highlight the methodological implications of human embodiment increasingly found their place alongside textual and philosophical representations associated with religious elites.

While the trajectory of scholarship on Buddhism broadly parallels the contours of the general field of religion, the field of Buddhist studies has expanded more tentatively beyond philological, philosophical, and “Protestant” modes of analysis. The field’s criteria for authoritative scholarship have continued to reflect the scholarly priorities of nineteenth-century Buddhologists, whose academic inquiries gave relatively little attention to the implications of human embodiment and lived experience. Instead they looked to authoritative collections of texts, especially sources judged to provide insight into the historical origins of Buddhism, as they sought to construct a coherent representation of Buddhism that could be compared with the belief systems of the other major world religions. Mid-nineteenth-century efforts to differentiate Buddhism from
Hinduism also reinforced the tendency to represent Buddhism as rational, philosophical, and anti-ritualistic.

The expansion of Buddhist studies from practices that privilege the editing, reading, and analysis of Buddhist texts to those centered on the observation and analysis of contemporary Buddhists engaged in embodied actions of varying degrees of formality have been accompanied by concerns about authenticity and authority. In fact, the relationship between text and practice in the pursuit of authentic knowledge has been central to the work of both Western academics and Buddhist practitioners. For example, debates about the relationship between *pariyatti*, a Pali term that refers to the study of Buddhist texts, and *paṭipatti*, which denotes the practice of the Buddha's teachings, have concerned members of the Theravada Buddhist sangha at least since the compilation of the highly influential Pali commentaries in the fifth century CE. As George Bond has noted, debates about the proper relationship between text and practice emerged in the nineteenth century as a key feature of Buddhist modernism, as different communities of Sri Lankan Buddhists debated the place of *bhavana*, mental cultivation or meditation, in the lives of lay and monastic Buddhists.

When examined from the standpoint of embodied practice, this contrast between textual study and meditation becomes more complicated than it might first appear. Because the earliest Indian Buddhist texts existed exclusively in oral forms and textual knowledge resided within the bodies of Buddhist monastics, early Buddhist textual practice was embodied and linked with living face-to-face forms of transmission quite different from later reading practices, which depended upon externalized written texts and their continued reinscription. Likewise, what counts as a form of practice has been complicated by nineteenth-century Euro-American scholars’ tendency to sharply differentiate meditation, associated with individualized forms of rationality, from other kinds of embodied behavior linked with collective display and affective expression, such as forms of offering and veneration directed toward relics. Thus a focus on practice opens up a broader consideration of what constitutes a Buddhist text and the diversity of practices centered upon it, and turns our attention to how particular forms of knowledge and their attendant practices are given authority by both scholars and practitioners, and scholar-practitioners.

The emergence of Buddhist practice as a category of scholarly inquiry has also brought into sharper focus the role of practice in defining and maintaining analytical boundaries. Attention to embodied practices within diverse communities of Buddhists works against efforts to clearly define and represent Buddhism as a singular coherent religion. The project of defining Buddhism was linked to the emergence of religion in the West as a key analytical category, a form of conceptualization largely absent from traditional Asian forms of knowledge construction. While nineteenth-century scholars recognized to varying degrees the diversity of Buddhist histories, their studies were often organized around a master narrative that began with an original philosophical purity, associated with the Buddha and his early monastic followers and constructed through a selective reading of Pali canonical sources, that
over time became corrupted (i.e., ritualized) under the influence of later generations of Buddhists whose affective needs transformed the Buddha into a god-like object of devotion. This narrative of pristine origins and decline was consonant with efforts to clearly differentiate the religions of Buddhism and Hinduism from one another, and resonated with accounts of the history of Christianity influenced by Protestant critiques of Catholic ritualism. As scholars turned to texts outside the Pali canon, which was for some time erroneously believed to represent the earliest forms of Buddhist tradition, a narrative of three distinct streams of Buddhist tradition came to dominate scholarly representations of Buddhism. Early Indian Buddhism was identified with the Hinayana/Theravada, followed by the emergence of the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions, each defined by their distinctive collections of Buddhist texts in different languages that formed the basis for scholars’ efforts to delineate their distinctive systems of belief and practice.

In contrast, the increasing prominence of field-based studies of diverse communities of Buddhists over the past several decades has illuminated the porous and contested nature of the boundaries that define different groups of Buddhists. These studies have also highlighted the role of embodied performance in constituting and defending a range of modern social identities that intersect in complex ways with other markers of belonging, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and citizenship in modern nation-states. Such representations of Buddhism tend toward more localized and particularized frames of analysis, and they commonly foreground the ways in which Buddhist beliefs and practices are embedded in local sociocultural dynamics.

While the field of religious studies has historically tended to foreground the “Eastern” or “non-Western” character of Buddhism, both in terms of its origins and historical lineages, during the past several decades increasing attention has been drawn to the establishment of Buddhist traditions in Europe and North America, and to the emergence of globalized forms of Buddhism deeply shaped by modern forms of transnational capitalism and new communication technologies. Once again, debates about the authenticity and authority of specific practices continue to shape the analysis and representation of these traditions, just as they continue to inform the internal dynamics of new communities of Buddhist practitioners. Among the issues that have emerged are the following: the centrality of meditation as the foundation for the authentic practice of Buddhism, in contrast to forms of devotional ritual; discourses centered on “mindfulness” as a generic form of mental discipline grounded in secular scientific discourses and practices; debates about the importance of foundational Buddhist cosmological principles such as karma and rebirth for authentic practice in the West; and discussions about the proper place of renunciant traditions in the sangha and the role that social hierarchies should play in its internal organization. Such negotiations increasingly take place within globalized frameworks of discourse and practice, marked by flows of Buddhist teachers, practitioners, and scholars across geographical and cultural boundaries that, until the late nineteenth century, supported the characterization of Buddhism as an "Asian" religion.
What do we mean by practice, and how does it differ from ritual? There is a long history of scholarship on religious ritual, and as Catherine Bell has noted, Western scholars of religion have frequently employed a binary contrast between belief and ritual in their analyses. Paralleling this conceptual dichotomy are a number of other conceptual contrasts with which the belief/ritual dyad is implicitly or explicitly linked, including paired contrasts between mind and body, and reason and emotion. Bell also observes that these analytical binaries have often served discursively to evoke and reinforce social hierarchies, in particular, a contrast between the detached outside observer (the scholar), implicitly associated with mind and rational analysis, and religious practitioners, whose embodied participation in the powerful sensory engagements of ritual action are assumed to preclude the possibility of their understanding the ritual’s true meaning within its sociocultural context. This contrast between belief and ritual is central to Durkheim’s influential definition of religion, and it finds a classic expression in Geertz’s analysis of religion as a cultural system, where he observes that outside observers can only aesthetically appreciate or scientifically dissect religious performances, in contrast to participants, for whom they are “enactments, materializations, realizations” of a particular religious perspective.

This dichotomous characterization of the relationship between belief and ritual on the one hand, and of the divergent perspectives of outside analysts and inside participants on the other, parallels a binary opposition that has structured an influential narrative of Buddhism’s historical origins in ancient India. This account highlights the Buddha’s rejection of brahmanic sacrifice, which construed karma as ritual action, in favor of an individualized and ethicized conception of karma, reconceived as an individual’s intentional actions. The Buddhist reconfiguration of karma’s significance, according to this narrative, is tied to the centrality of Buddhist meditation, which is understood to facilitate the individual’s process of gaining analytical distance from the body and its sensory attachments. Once again, this tendency to privilege mind over body and detached rationality over somatically grounded sensation and emotion, linked with a powerful discourse of normative monastic renunciation and social disengagement, has contributed to problematic characterizations of Buddhism as anti-ritualistic, and has deflected attention from the centrality of embodied practices in Buddhist communities. It has, for example, tended to obscure the ways in which Buddhist meditation can be understood as a kind of embodied practice, and neglected forms of engagement with Buddhist texts that aren’t focused on their semantic content.

We have chosen to organize this handbook around the category of Buddhist practice, rather than Buddhist ritual, because “practice” foregrounds the centrality of embodied action without necessarily implying that the action in question is highly formalized and repetitious. It points instead to the fluid and open-ended character of ritualization,
which we regard as a wide-ranging behavioral dynamic marked by varying degrees of formalization and improvisation, a dynamic that is most fruitfully engaged when the observable actions of embodied individuals are explored in connection with the particular material and social environments that frame those actions. We thus seek to keep in continuous play the interactions of three analytically distinct registers: individuals’ bodies, marked by complex internal systems of psycho-physical interaction; distinct material environments that afford those individuals a range of concrete possibilities for sensory engagement; and particular forms of social organization linked to power and authority that shape human interactions. In this sense, practice can be understood as fundamentally about kinds of strategic behavior, as the sometimes convergent and sometimes divergent aims of particular individuals and social groups play out through their embodied interactions. What marks a particular practice as “Buddhist” is itself a matter of strategic engagement, and this includes a given person’s self-identification along the scholar-practitioner continuum, an identification that may change according to context.

**Continuum of Contexts**

Our attention to embodied thought and action invites attention to the implications of positionality and context. Analytically highlighting the relationships among the three foci of individual person, material surround, and social interactions foregrounds the interactive and emergent properties of human practice, and points to the diversity of analytical standpoints that potentially come into play in the work of Buddhist scholars and practitioners. Consider, for example, the interactions of these three registers within the confines of a library, which is both an independent physical structure and a socially constituted site that shapes the interactions between the people who use it and the objects that it preserves and controls for particular purposes. Those granted access to it commonly embody a set of authoritative skills cultivated over many years (e.g., language mastery, paleography), skills finely calibrated to the effective use of the texts that it contains (e.g., reading, transcription, memorization, oral recitation), and that form the basis for other practices that extend beyond the library’s walls (e.g., writing, teaching, publication, chanting, invocation). Thus while the library as physical structure and social institution represents a key location for understanding some formative “Buddhist” practices for both scholars and practitioners, the broader significance of those practices emerges only when they are viewed in relationship to additional practices that unfold outside its walls, practices around which various forms of authority and authenticity are constellated and performed. Moreover, how one understands a given library practice varies depending upon one’s standpoint, whether framed by the experience of particular library users and their individual motivations, by the material characteristics of the library itself as it impinges upon those who enter and use it (or are excluded from its use), or viewed in relation to broader social dynamics that set the terms for how the
texts preserved in the library can and should be used and how possible interpretations of their meaning are secured.

The human body is constituted of complex biologically conditioned features, including sexual organs, skin color, and a complex sensory apparatus, as well as socially constructed markers of identity and status such as gender, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity. Human orientations toward and engagements with surrounding materiality emerge interactively in accordance with the constraints and possibilities imposed by particular physical bodies, the impact of specific material features of their surrounding environments, and in relation to the particular behavioral and linguistic codes into which people have been socialized. Among the culturally inflected variables that influence these human orientations are foundational constructions of the relationship between the mind and body, between the self and others, and of the proper ordering of community, for example, by assumptions about inalienable individual rights and the justness of hierarchical power differentials.

Our focus on religious practice highlights the role of ritualized behavior in mediating the complex and ongoing sensory interactions of human bodies with their material surroundings. One particular sense may be foregrounded in a given practice, such as touch when holding prayer beads, mind when visualizing Avalokiteśvara, or taste when sipping ceremonial tea. How these interactions affect the body and what the encounter might mean to a practitioner or scholarly observer is simultaneously constrained and open-ended. One person may be transported through an olfactory encounter with incense that intensifies attention to the present moment, while another may experience an allergic reaction and choose in the future to only practice in spaces that mandate unscented offerings. Participants in religious practice function simultaneously in all three registers, embedded in rich milieux with individual, material, and social dimensions. For example, an encounter with monastics in silk brocade robes chanting before a golden Buddha creates a sensorium of auditory, visual, and mental activity that may strengthen the monks’ religious authority for one practitioner, provoke an anti-clerical response in another, while inclining a scholarly observer to theorize about Buddhist cosmologies, social hierarchies, or the aesthetics of Buddhist practice. And the criteria for judging who has the privileged perspective on the significance of this encounter are likewise deeply linked to diverse forms of practice that extend well beyond the confines of the temple in which the encounters take place.

Varying ontological and cosmological worldviews augment the range of sensory encounters with materiality. Some Buddhists, for example, hold that a rock can manifest Buddha-nature, while others, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, regard a rock as mere materiality lacking potential sentience. Buddhist practitioners who cohabit a world with living bodhisattvas may feel exaltation upon seeing His Holiness the Dalai Lama, an incarnation of the bodhisattva of compassion, or may feel protected by wearing a red cord he has blessed. Some would never let a text they consider sacred touch the floor, while others remain aloof as dust accumulates on a book that they devoted years of their lives to writing. Practices like pilgrimage follow the contours of a textually narrated Buddhist geography, marked out by stupas and images, even as the moving bodies of pilgrims
bring those pathways to life. Predisposed as social beings to coordinate with others and sharing deep somatic capacities for synchronization through shared sensory stimulation, religious practices often engender powerful integrative experiences, even as they potentially sharpen the divide between insiders and outsiders and heighten conflict over territorial control.

Each person has a distinct experiential perspective influenced by physical differences and personal memories, yet each individual is also deeply socialized in ways that can be analyzed from a variety of theoretical perspectives. Attention to forms of embodied social interaction illuminates the ebbs and flows of inclusion and estrangement, the orchestration of unequal access to prestige, authority, and material resources, and broad dynamics of conflict and cooperation orchestrated by markers of difference and solidarity, such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and racialization. For example, in the history of conflict over women's ordination, one can observe how different sangha institutions, in some cases aligned with state-directed forms of political power, have acted in particular circumstances to support or suppress the struggles of Buddhist women to pursue their highest religious aspirations. And ordination itself is a powerful form of practice that significantly alters the lives of those who undertake it through transformations of their bodies (removing hair and donning robes), changes in their material surroundings (ranging from solitary forest dwellings to large urban monastic complexes), and, in many cases, significant status elevation closely keyed to restrictive behavioral codes and expectations of ritual proficiency.

**Viewing Buddhist Practice through Lenses of Emotion, Embodiment, and Agency**

As an exercise in conceptual cartography, this *Handbook* seeks to nurture the emergence of innovative and self-reflective Buddhist studies scholarship by providing some analytical landmarks for orienting readers to the rich diversity of practices that animate Buddhist lives and cultures. Facing this potentially overwhelming panoply of actions undertaken by countless Buddhists across a vast geographical, historical, and cultural expanse, it is reasonable to ask: What, if anything, do they have in common? One possible answer: these forms of practice share an orientation toward reducing suffering (*duḥkha*). In keeping with this core concern, this volume explores a number of strategic practices that diverse communities of Buddhists have undertaken as they navigate the perils of samsara and pursue diverse liberatory ideals.

We have organized our mapping of the terrain of Buddhist practice through the heuristic lenses of three key dimensions of religious practice. Whatever else they might entail, Buddhist practices evoke and direct a wide range of emotions, are grounded in human embodiment, and support the agency of those who undertake them to realize
particular goals. While it is a commonplace of modern scholarship to presume a clear division between the aims and methods of scholars of Buddhism on the one hand, and of “religious” or “spiritual” practitioners on the other, this volume seeks to explore what these distinctive forms of practice have in common, as well as what distinguishes them, whether the goals articulated for undertaking them be the gaining of insight or tenure. The approaches and methods that scholars and practitioners undertake—whether discursively framed as first-person, second-person, or third-person—reflect the dynamics entailed by human emotion, embodiment, and agency. Issues of authenticity and authority likewise inform the actions that scholars and practitioners perform, even if the criteria for identifying and resolving those issues may vary greatly depending upon their respective contexts.

Emotion

Emotion and religion have a long and tangled history in Western analytical traditions. Emotion or “feeling” has, at times, been identified as the essence of religion and, when linked with private forms of subjective experience, functioned as a bulwark against the deconstructive power of scientific rationality. There is also a long history of debate over the primary location of emotions: Are they best understood as sense-based mental disturbances, as somatically grounded instinctual responses linked to human evolution, or as fundamentally social phenomena with complex histories and a wide range of distinctive cultural forms? Where one locates emotions, whether as fundamentally biological and universal across the human species or as socially and culturally differentiated, has powerful analytical and epistemological consequences. Are emotions susceptible to rational inquiry? What is their relationship to cognitive processes? And what role do they or should they play in authoritative knowledge construction?

It is important to note at the outset that traditional Buddhist discourses lack any direct lexical equivalent to the term “emotion.” A wide range of particular emotions have been clearly differentiated in various Buddhist analytical projects, often broadly evaluated as either “skillful” or “unskillful” (kuśala/akuśala) with respect to their role in one’s advance or retreat along the path to ultimate liberation from suffering. Generalized discussions about the role of emotion in Buddhism are thus potentially misleading, since using the broad category of emotion tends to aggregate things that diverse Buddhist discourses have typically differentiated. And there is also the enduring legacy of nineteenth-century representations of Buddhism as a religion of systematic emotional detachment, programmatically devoid of sentiments of devotion, at least in its earliest and ostensibly more authentic forms. Thus one might be surprised, for example, that the practice of cultivating upaśā, “equanimity” (one of the four brahmavihāras, or “divine abodings”), aims at developing a positive emotion, not extirpating emotion altogether.

As recent Buddhist studies scholarship has highlighted, Buddhist communities have, through their religious practices, cultivated and orchestrated a wide range of
somatically grounded emotional responses. Examples include the powerful effects of drawing near the glorious bodies of buddhas and bodhisattvas (present in the flesh or materially mediated through relics, texts, and images), of setting forth on extended pilgrimages to access the powerful effects of localized forms of religious presence, and of accessing virtual worlds through the mediation of Buddhist websites and smartphone apps.

The increasing prevalence of ethnographically based scholarship has contributed greatly to an appreciation of the disparate emotional valences of lived religion within a diversity of contemporary Buddhist communities, and ethnographic methodology has recognized the intersubjective and affective dimensions of ethnographic fieldwork. Text-based scriptural analyses, whether pursued in secular academic contexts or within communities of Dharma practice, have generally been less attuned to the positive role of emotion in Buddhist traditions, though creative engagements with different genres of Buddhist texts have also played a key role in foregrounding the capacity of narrative to evoke powerful feelings. Consider, for example, this seemingly disembodied aphorism in the Dhammapada “No sons there are for protection, / Neither father nor even relations, / For one seized by the End-Maker; Among relations there is no protection. / Knowing this fact, The wise one, restrained by virtue, / Would make clear, right quickly, / The path leading to Nibbāna.” Theravada commentarial tradition links this verse to a story about Pāṭācārā, who loses her husband, children, and parents on a single day, descends into a grief so profound that she walks about the city naked, and returns to sanity through an encounter with the Buddha’s profound compassion. This narrative grants the verses an embodied emotional urgency, and opens up a social world marked by class and gender difference.

Attention to the emotional power of visual images and their behavioral force reveals an additional dimension of Buddhist practice. Consider these two visual representations of the Pāṭācārā story in Sri Lanka, the first a version of the narrative painted in the 1990s at Bellanvila Temple near Colombo (Figure 1.1), the second a nineteenth-century depiction from Kataluva Temple in the south (Figure 1.2). The Bellanvila scene shown here depicts Pāṭācārā using her body to shelter her children from a torrential downpour, powerfully evoking the embodied force of her fierce love and self-sacrificing desire to protect them. The tragic limits of this maternal care and its cost in suffering soon become apparent when both of her children are swept to their deaths as they attempt to cross a stream engorged by the rains.

The depth of Pāṭācārā’s suffering, brought to a climax when she learns that her mother, father, and brother have all perished from the collapse of their house during the storm, appears in the nineteenth-century painting from Kataluva; here Pāṭācārā is shown wandering about, deranged by her grief and oblivious to the loss of her clothing until she encounters the Buddha, whose compassion returns her to her senses, and she requests permission to go forth as a member of the women’s monastic community. Subsequent scenes depict her life as a bhikkhuṇī, later known as “foremost in the mastery of the Vinaya” (a striking contrast to her earlier naked disorientation) and spiritual preceptor.
Paula Arai and Kevin Trainor

to a large community of Buddhist nuns. These depictions propel their viewers through a complex web of interdependent and emergent emotional forces linked to the visually mediated story of Paṭācārā, as well as to the viewers’ own diverse emotional histories.

As a relatively distanced observer, I can easily catalog the distinct series of emotions evoked in Paṭācārā’s story, from her socially disruptive love for the lower-class servant who became her husband, her continued longing to return to the family she disgraced, her maternal care to protect and nurture her children, her overpowering grief and disorientation elicited by the loss of all her loved ones, her return to equanimity through the Buddha’s compassionate presence, and finally her own compassionate nurturing of the religious lives of the women in her community. What I cannot confidently assess is how these emotional potentials, embodied quite differently in these two distinct temple paintings, gain force and consequence in the emotional lives of the individuals who encounter them in real time, each shaped by unique individual stories as well as a diversity of social identities and roles. Even if one must acknowledge the relative analytical indeterminacy of these affective forces, their connection to Buddhist practice remains clear, particularly when we situate these paintings in the temple settings that frame them, which provide the immediate opportunity for merit-making offerings and acts of veneration.

**Figure 1.1.** Detail from temple mural depicting Paṭācārā sheltering her children from the storm with her body. Painted in the 1990s by Somabandu Vidyapati, Bellanvila Rajamaha Viharaya.

Photo: Kevin Trainor.
Embodiment

Bodies are primary sites of Buddhist practice. Buddhist discourses commonly investigate the body as a privileged location for observing and analyzing the dynamic, interactive forces that shape human perception, intentionality, and action. Embodiment as a heuristic lens highlights the interdependence of internal and external factors that shape individual experiences, which can be seen both as a manifestation of those factors, as well as the basis upon which subsequent perceptions and actions predictably unfold in time and space. Exploring Buddhist practice through the lens of embodiment illuminates a plethora of stark and subtle distinctions between people and reveals patterns rippling through a cross section of socio-historical milieux.

When viewing Buddhist practice through the lens of embodiment, two broad dynamics come into focus: body as problem and body as solution. These different notions of the body elucidate a range of practice strategies that are based upon varying understandings of the relationship of practice to awakening. Practices that observe the body as problem home in on impermanent, impure, and sensory distortions associated with the body. Practices to address these problems are diverse, ranging from meditating...
on a decomposing corpse to simply avoiding activities perceived as stimulating sensory desires and attachments. One could argue that the Buddhist monastic discipline codified in the Vinaya aims at addressing the body as problem.

In contrast, two major currents run through the body-as-solution orientation. One current delineates body as process and highlights transformation; here body is a primary medium for development and improvement. Practices that characterize this current include such practices as chanting, seated meditation, making offerings at an altar, and pilgrimage. The other current sees the body as the site of realization. Viewed from this perspective, the body is not a means to an end, but rather the locus of awakening. Practice is approached as a matter of acting in accord with the inherently enlightened nature of the body, fully present in the most mundane of activities, from eating to defecating. Looking through the lens of embodiment thus reveals how diverse Buddhist body-centered discourses construct a continuum of valorizations, from body as font of impurity and fountainhead of suffering to body as carriage of bliss and manifestation of buddha-nature.

The lens of embodiment also throws into relief how current communities and institutions of Buddhist practice and scholarship wrestle with a multiplicity of embodied identities. All bodies are subject to taxonomies of identity formation, including race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, and variations of bodily shape and ability. These differences, variably identified with individual bodies, are often indexed to hierarchies of social authority and authenticity. Such value-based differentiations define and police the boundaries of social groups by marking particular bodies as included or excluded. Examining the possibilities and limitations that forms of embodiment foster sheds light on how power, agency, and value are culturally and socially encoded and distributed. How one perceives a body and which social constructs are attended to has a wide range of potential effects for practitioners, whether they locate themselves within academic or Dharma-based communities.

Social constructions of embodiment can impose positive or negative valences on bodily features, according to context. Those recognized as belonging to the hegemonic norm display embodied markers that are assessed positively and are accorded authority and power. Those whose embodiment does not match dominant norms are prone to being devalued and marginalized. Under some circumstances, however, markers of marginality are positively assessed by the majority, such as when dominant members of the group pursue ideals of inclusion and diversity. In either case, imposed negative and positive identities have an impact on individuals and groups. While not all group members internalize the assumptions of the dominant value system, the conditions within which they must seek their own well-being create very different possibilities for flourishing, depending on their relative congruence with the ideological and institutional constraints imposed by the dominant group.

Discourses on non-self in Dharma community contexts illustrate the complexity of issues that come into play when attention is directed toward dynamics of embodiment. Recourse to the principle of non-self may direct attention away from the effects of embodied social differences, allowing members of the dominant community to
ignore incidents of micro-aggression and conditions of structural injustice. Moreover, an emphasis on individual responsibility for one’s life circumstances, reinforced by constructions of karmic agency and the primacy of individual perceptions, may blunt an awareness of the need for collective action to dismantle systematic oppression. Thus invoking non-self discourses may privilege the dominant group and reinforce marginalization. At the same time, practitioners outside the dominant group may find that cultivating an awareness of non-self heightens their insight into the conditioned and transient nature of the self and supports the deconstruction of harmful perceptions and attitudes, providing resources for resistance.

In academic contexts, scholarship that ignores the implications of embodiment, especially of marginalized bodies, deflects attention away from power differentials tied to embodied differences and reinforces a normativity that unconsciously supports the privileged majority. Problematic perceptions of scholars’ bodies linked to assumptions about differentials of intelligence and authority may influence search committees, letters of recommendation, course evaluations, and performance reviews. Attention to embodied differences, for example, gender and race/ethnicity, opens up a critical understanding of how particular religious texts, commonly assumed to represent the views of a dominant minority whose authority those texts support. Analyses that are inattentive to the social force of embodied differences obscure the forms of practice, self-understanding, and agency of members of the community outside the dominant group. A focus on embodiment is thus vital to critical scholarship, for it highlights how unconscious assumptions about embodied differences potentially influence scholarly interpretations, and it directs attention to the lives of community members whose perspectives and practices may not be visible or accurately represented in the authorized representations of particular religious communities.

Recognizing the bodily conditions of scholarly practice can in turn illuminate how our own bodily particularities and those of the people with whom we engage might affect our selection of topics and authoritative sources, and predispose us to dismiss or favor certain methodological and theoretical approaches. Being conscious of our embodied particularity and its implications leads us to acknowledge the limitations and incompleteness of any analytical project, and encourages us to open our scholarship to a broader community of conversation partners.

Academic analysis informed by an understanding of the ways that scholarly practice is itself shaped by the scholar’s own embodiment and particular forms of practice supports the production of qualitative knowledge that is richly contextualized, thus foregrounding the diversity of Buddhist communities and highlighting the dangers of static and essentialized generalizations about “Buddhist” ideas and ideals. In highlighting the particularities of embodied life, the dynamics of the tradition as practiced—whether in the present day or in historically distant communities—come more clearly into view, making palpable the local, somatic, and kinesthetic dimensions of lived religion. In this way, the emergent properties of practice are brought to the fore and, depending upon the scholar’s analytical focus, a clearer understanding of their
cognitive, social, psychological, aesthetic, political, or spiritual dimensions becomes available.

Agency

In focusing on agency as a key dimension of practice, we take as a starting point the observation that practice has a strong strategic orientation. In other words, it is purposive behavior that is typically formalized in ways that set it apart from more random, spontaneous activities, and those who undertake it do so to pursue particular aims, shaped by individual and communal interests. In this respect, both Buddhist and academic practitioners engage in forms of practice that they perceive to be efficacious and empowering. But by what criteria are particular acts determined to be efficacious, and toward what ends? Whose authority and what material constraints set the conditions within which efficacy is experienced and assessed?

Central to notions of agency are basic assumptions about how individual agents are constituted. For example, do the kinds of relatively formalized behaviors that we identify as strategic presume a self-conscious agent performing actions directed toward realizing intentional ends that can be explicitly articulated? Given the powerful role of sensory interactions in human behavior and their links to somatically grounded affects, is it perhaps apposite to consider the agency of human bodies that seek their own ends apart from and possibly contrary to conscious choice? In addition, how do particular foundational assumptions, for example Buddhist teachings of anātman (the absence of a stable and enduring self) or scientific models of material causation, enable or thwart particular forms of human agency?

Our focus on the dynamics of Buddhist practice, in keeping with the continuum of contexts identified previously (internal psycho-physical dynamics, sensory engagements with material environments, social dynamics), highlights the interactive and emergent character of human agency, and recognizes that agency takes on different appearances depending upon the viewer’s location and the analytical frameworks they employ. Broadly speaking, scholars of Buddhist traditions located in Euro-American traditions of scholarship work within institutions that value objectivity and support practices aimed at intersubjective validation as a means of securing authoritative knowledge. Consequently, claims to knowledge grounded in private forms of experience and personal subjectivity are commonly met with professional skepticism, particularly in the natural and social sciences. Ideals and disciplines of scientific rigor and objective analysis are socially and materially supported through funding agencies, research laboratories, libraries, academic presses, and elaborate peer-review practices aimed at minimizing the distorting effects of personal bias. At the same time, ideals of individual creativity and ownership of the scholar’s unique intellectual products are affirmed through formal citation practices and copyright laws devised to protect private property.

An alternative practice of intersubjective validation informs the increasing prominence of field-based research within contemporary Buddhist communities. Grounded
in epistemologies that affirm the value of emotion and embodied experience for inter-
personal understanding, these forms of scholarship commonly foreground the impact 
of a scholar’s subject-position within a field of unequal power relationships and poten-
tially heighten awareness of the ethical implications of scholarly representations in ways 
that text-based analyses of historically distant Buddhist communities have not.

A perceived disjunction between those who work in academic institutions and those 
who participate in Dharma communities is heightened in the United States by constitu-
tionally based prohibitions against public funding for religious groups. Many scholars 
of Buddhism working in state-supported religious studies departments take pains to 
sharply differentiate their “study” of religion from its “practice” by Buddhists. Emerging 
debates over “mindfulness” practices illuminate the fraught nature of this distinction. Whether mindfulness counts as “Buddhist” and “religious” depends upon the contexts in which it is practiced, as well as on the contested meanings of those categories and 
the forms of agency that they enable. Secularized forms of mindfulness are widely prac-
ticed in hospitals and in state-supported educational institutions, reflecting what Jeff 
Wilson has termed a process of “mystification” that obscures the practice’s historical and cultural roots. Critics of the incorporation of these practices in public schools char-
acterize them as forms of “stealth Buddhism,” deeply embedded in a system of ethical 
values that they regard as religious. Collaborative research undertaken by scientists 
and practitioners of “contemplative wisdom” over the past three decades under the 
aegis of the Mind and Life Institute likewise points to an extensive framework of shared 
inquiry and practice that strategically blurs the boundaries between the domains of science and spirituality as these have been formulated within the context of Western modernity.

A focus on agency in the context of Buddhist practice directs scholarly attention away 
from static generalizations about what Buddhists believe and toward the enormous di-
versity of cultural and historical contexts within which Buddhists have taken up particular forms of action aimed at the alleviation of suffering. However multiform these practices, they have generally been framed within a worldview in which the effects of “skillful” and “unskillful” actions play out over multiple lifetimes, and in which access to the Dharma and the sangha, linked to the compassionate activities of buddhas and bodhisattvas, provides essential guidance along the path to awakening.

While some authoritative Buddhist discourses frame action and its consequences primarily in terms of conscious intentionality and foreground individual agency as determinative for progressing along the path to awakening, others emphasize modes of interdependence. These include accounts of supportive relationships forged within Buddhist communities, both lay and monastic, and stories of the liberative force of embodied encounters with extraordinary human and nonhuman agents (buddhas, arhats, bodhisattvas, deities). Such accounts are often tied to privileged locations set apart through various formal ritual strategies (temples, domestic shrines, stupas, moun-
tains) and are frequently linked to aesthetically powerful objects (relics and reliquaries, images, mandalas) that materially mediate the presence of those powerful agents of liberation.
These latter settings, which foreground interactive relationships between the bodies of individual agents and the material and social settings within which they are situated, figure prominently in the essays collected in this volume. While the idea of a handbook implies a certain comprehensiveness and hands-on practicality, we have organized this collection with a keen awareness that the dynamics of practice, embedded in individual bodies and particular locations, push against efforts to generalize and systematize. In place of comprehensiveness, we have sought to include a diversity of examples from various Buddhist traditions, cultural locations, and historical periods, organized around several interpretive settings useful for observing the dynamics of Buddhist practice. These include broad regional perspectives, formative examples of material mediation, physical bodies as sites of transformation and body-mind interaction, powerful sites of human and nonhuman interaction, relationships within and between lay and monastic communities, and several emergent forms of Buddhist practice shaped by conditions of modernity and the influence of globalization. By including essays written by scholars whose work is informed by a variety of critical methodologies (textual analysis, historical research, archaeology, field-based ethnography) and relationships to Dharma practice (hospital chaplain, Dharma teachers, ordained, lay, and non-practitioners), we have sought to showcase a wide range of potential approaches, and we are hopeful this volume will support an expanding dialogue as our readers make use of it, creating new conversations as they selectively engage the perspectives of individual contributors while pursuing their own areas of research.

Notes

5. Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 113–14; Geertz critiques functionalist analyses that simply reduce religious representations to underlying social dynamics.
6. See, for example, Gombrich’s account of this: “... for brahminism morality remained mainly extrinsic, like ritual: realized in action which derives its value from the social context. It was the Buddha who first completely ethicized the concept: in Hinduism ritual and moral obligations remain lumped together”; Richard F. Gombrich, Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988), 46.

8. The role of emotion or “affect” in the study of religion is explored in Donovan Schaefer, *Religious Affect: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015). Donovan demonstrates the power of affect studies to reorient the study of religion from approaches that privilege linguistically based analysis to those grounded in somatically based affects and the priority of human intersubjectivity.


13. It is noteworthy that the twentieth-century depiction at Bellanvila Temple does not depict the nude body of Paṭācārā, even though other paintings in that temple, by the same painter, depict female nudity.


17. See https://www.mindandlife.org/mission/.

**Further Reading**


The first five chapters in Part I provide an orientation to broader dynamics of Buddhist practice, framed within one of five commonly differentiated geographical regions; a sixth chapter explores globalized dynamics of twenty-first-century forms of practice. Each of the five regions is, to varying degrees, characterized by shared historical, cultural, or linguistic influences that have shaped the transmission and adaptation of distinctive forms of Buddhist tradition and practice. These essays are intended to provide a more comprehensive orientation, in contrast to the essays organized in the subsequent six parts, which are grouped together by distinctive dimensions of Buddhist practice that the authors explore in greater particularity, reflecting the embeddedness of their research into Buddhist practices in local contexts. Foregrounding these regional perspectives, rather than the commonly differentiated traditions of Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana, underscores the embodied nature of Buddhist practice and highlights its great multiplicity and diversity.

Inevitably, a focus on regional dynamics draws attention away from the complex flows of people, ideas, and practices across regional boundaries that have characterized Buddhist traditions over more than two millennia. Consider, for example, the case of Sri Lankan Buddhist traditions, which are historically grounded in South Asian linguistic and cultural dynamics, but which here are primarily explored in the context of Southeast Asian cultural and political formations. This points to the value of reading the regional overviews in relation to each other, attuned to broader movements of people and practices across regional boundaries, enabled in part by modern technologies and forms of categorization, not least of which is the idea of “Buddhism” itself.
The South Asian subcontinent spans areas presently designated as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the Nepal Terai. As a geographic region, the landmass of South Asia is bordered by the Hindu Kush and Himalayan mountain ranges, the Arabian Sea, and the Indian Ocean. The topography of the region afforded overland routes, waterways, and seaports for the royal emissaries and trade networks that carried Buddhism from its heartland in the fertile Indo-Gangetic Plain throughout the subcontinent and across Asia, where it took root and gained diverse cultural and local inflections. The kingdom in which Shakyamuni was born and grew to adulthood is within the current border of Nepal, while his religious quest and post-enlightenment activities were concentrated in northeastern India. There are scant archaeological records of Buddhist practice during the lifetime of the Buddha in perhaps the fifth or early fourth century BCE. However, scholars seeking to reconstruct and understand the practices of South Asian Buddhists of millennia past encounter an abundance of architectural, artistic, and inscriptive evidence from the third century BCE onward, eventually joined by scriptural literature, that remains rich and challengingly complex through the close of the Pāla period in the twelfth century CE.

In what follows, my discussion adheres to a broadly chronological treatment of South Asian Buddhism as it evolved through the early formative period (third century BCE through second century CE), Mahayana movement (first century CE onward), and Vajrayana tradition (seventh through twelfth centuries CE). This is not a literal periodization and does not imply supersession of a given practice or movement by another but is, rather, a way to identify trends whose emergence builds on and extends previous developments that persisted alongside them.

My thematic focus is the recognition and veneration of female generative power that is rooted in the cultural substrate of the South Asian subcontinent and wends through Buddhist thought, iconography, and practice. Gender roles have been scripted and negotiated throughout Buddhist history in ways to which scholars are attending with
increasing nuance. Nonetheless, an enduring feature of South Asian Buddhism is a recognition of female bodies—from maternal earth and feminine facets of nature to lofty goddesses—as sources of life, birth, vital energies, and transformative power, which in turn are conditions of spiritual practice and attainment. Moreover, Buddhism has never posited a separation of mind and matter that might demand a rejection of bodily existence and the material world (matter, matrix, mother) as a condition of spiritual progress. Buddhism has located the primary sources of suffering and illusion within the purview of consciousness, which is inextricable from embodiment.

**Early Buddhism**

Among the earliest and most enduring records of Buddhist practice are sites centering on stupas, monuments that at once commemorate Shakyamuni and make him tangibly present in the form of relics. South Asian stupa sites are the focus of voluminous scholarship and ongoing archaeological discovery, continuously augmenting evidence of Buddhist practices in South Asia. My discussion begins with the earliest extant examples, the base from which the stupa began its long course of evolution. The early stupa of the first century BCE through second century CE was a solid hemispheric dome topped by a modest pinnacle and surrounded by circumambulatory paths and a railing (vedikā) whose gates, pillars, and crossbars were elaborately carved with sacred imagery, worship scenes, and supernatural and divine beings.²

The primary purpose of a stupa is to serve as a womb for the relics of Shakyamuni Buddha (and, over time, other Buddhist venerables). This purpose is inherent in the origin, design, and designations of the stupa mound. The earliest roots of the stupa mound are arguably traceable to a global Paleolithic and Neolithic practice spanning millennia of burial in a womb-shaped space—be it a cave, pottery vessel, or built structure—to signal not the end of life, but return to the birth source for transition to the next phase of the life cycle. In South Asia, the stupa mound has historical precedent in the tumulus, a low, earthen burial mound in which remains were deposited at the core, just at or below ground level.³ The outward appearance of the mound resembles the swelling of a pregnant stomach, perhaps indicating a place where the maternal earth swells with pregnancy, casting the tomb not as a final resting place but as a repository for regeneration and rebirth.

That the stupa is a womb is reflected in the Buddhist terminology. The mound is termed “womb” (garbha), while the central receptacle encasing the relics is the “egg” (aṇḍa). A womb provides the conditions for gestation, while an egg contains an embryo and a concentration of nutrients. Another term for the stupa dome is kumbha, referring to a rotund vessel with a narrowed neck that has served as a womb in ritual practice and visual symbolism from the Vedic period to the present and across traditions. The many uses of the kumbha as a burial urn, reliquary, ritual vessel, and iconographic motif stem from the primary understanding of the vessel as a womb, a vessel of generation and
transformation that implicitly contains life-giving water, the nectar of immortality, or the vital elixir of life.

The function of the stupa-as-womb helps us understand why the mound is solid (rather than hollow) and remains relatively plain. A womb is by nature a dark, safely sheltered space whose purpose is enclosure rather than display. The vitality of life forces within the chthonic womb is conveyed by the exuberant imagery carved on the surrounding railing and gates. The iconographic program abounds with burgeoning vegetation, fruit-laden trees, treasure-bearing vines (*kalpa-latā*), brimming vessels, pearl garlands, and female figures whose ample breasts and hips proclaim their fertility. Aquatic motifs include conch shells, water birds, turtles, crocodilian creatures (*makara*), fish-tailed mammals, elephants spraying water, and, foremost among them, the water-borne lotus. The unfurling tendrils and branching stalks of lotus rhizomes wend through the stupa reliefs, while open-faced blossoms in astonishing array and inventiveness of design animate the stupa-railing pillars and crossbars. The lotuses may sprout from a *kumbha* whose amniotic elixir sustains luxuriant growth. The prominence of water imagery celebrates the life-sustaining rains that renew the growth cycle in an arid climate punctuated by monsoons and reflects what Ananda Coomaraswamy terms a “water cosmology,” which recognizes water (rather than earth or space) as the primordial source of life.

A unifying theme of this imagery is primary generative power: water as the source of existence, the lotus that self-generates from its own rhizome, the female body, and rainfall as a condition of agrarian life. The life-giving fluids and forces flow as well through fruit-bearing trees, undulating vines, vases of plenty, and blossoming nature. All the aforementioned motifs have a feminine resonance. Those steeped in that iconographic realm would recognize this integrated body of imagery as the visual vocabulary of a theology of female generative power.

Female figures, too, found prominent placement at several of the earliest stupa sites, where their large-scale effigies variously appear on railing pillars, the towering gates, and at one site completely encircling the stupa on outward-facing pillars. Most of the figures are identifiable by inscription or iconography as *yakṣīṇīs*, members of a populous class of divinities revered in India for a broad range of benefactions. Although rendered in different stylistic idioms, their manner of portrayal consistently emphasizes their feminality through curvaceous bodily contours, deeply carved pudenda, diaphanous clothing, and detailed embellishments of feminine beauty: layers of bracelets and necklaces, elaborately coifed hair, and gracefully cascading scarves. The most articulated feature is a hip belt (*mekhalā*) fashioned of multiple strands of beads of varying shapes and materials (seeds, valuable stones, gems, precious metals, coins) and a clasp of ornate design.

The understanding of the stupa as womb is confirmed by the visual parallel between the shape of the stupa mound and the abdominal contours of the *yakṣīṇī*. The abdomen and hips, as they expand from a tapered waist, form a half-circle that replicates the hemispheric stupa dome. The intricately carved stupa railings resemble the hip belt that adorns *yakṣīṇīs*’ hips and serve a comparable role. The stupa-womb itself requires no
embellishment but is glorified by adornment, just as the hips of women and goddesses have been adorned by bands and elaborate hip girdles in South Asian figural arts from the earliest extant strata to the present.

The imagery in the stupa sculptural programs conveys symbolic meanings but does not simply portray ideals or promised realities. In the South Asian cultural sphere, sacred images are not simply illustrations of what they depict. They have an active potency imbeded by the materials from which they are made (in this case, living stone), ritual processes during their creation, and properties inherent in the designs. The forces, energies, and beings they represent are made present by their portrayal. On this principle, the imagery surrounding a stupa serves as a repository of life-enhancing energies. The inexhaustible fertility of the rhizome, ever-flowing vessel, and female bodies form a matrix of vitalizing forces that nurture and enliven the relics within, perpetually fertilizing the field of merit.

Stupa sites accommodated a range of religious practices: individual and communal, lay and clergy-led, meditative and celebratory. The open-air complex that constellated around a main stupa included processional paths for circumambulation, paved walkways and areas for assembly, water tanks, wells, gardens, and other sacra, such as additional stupas, subsidiary shrines, pillars, and Dharma wheels. Worship scenes among the stupa carvings show devotees standing before the sacra with hands pressed together at the heart in a gesture of reverence, gazing upward in adoration or with head bowed. Some kneel; some touch their forehead to the ground or render full body prostration. Votaries come bearing platters and flasks of offerings and flower garlands. There are gatherings of worshippers making musical offerings with flutes, drums, and stringed instruments and bodies swaying in celebratory dance. Such practices were drawn from a common South Asian vocabulary of devotion and remain central to the Buddhist reverential and merit-making repertoire. Among the worshippers are individuals, couples, adults accompanied by children in what appear to be family groups, and people of different geographic origins and social standing, including royalty, a diversity reflected in donative inscriptions as well.

The main stupa was the visual and spiritual focal point of a given site, but other sacra also received worship. These included footprints, Dharma wheels atop pillars, sacred trees, and votive stupas of other esteemed persons. Many divinities and supernatural beings appear in stupa reliefs among the celebrants of Shakyamuni, but some were singled out for independent portrayal and reverence. Figures chosen for this emphasis include the guardian kings of the four directions, yakṣas, and, most numerous among them, the yakṣinīs discussed earlier. Their effigies are featured on gateway pillars and the outward face of railing pillars, where they could be venerated during a preliminary round of circumambulation on the outermost walkway before entrance through the eastern gate to circumambulate the stupa itself.

These images, as living repositories of the beings or genre of beings they portray, would receive votive offerings (such as food, incense, lamplight, and flowers) and be supplicated for their customary blessings of abundance, offspring, flourishing health and fortunes, bountiful crops, safe travels, and protection from natural dangers and
mischievous and malevolent spirits. Buddhist narratives are replete with tales of divine and supernatural beings who joined the congregation of Shakyamuni, pledged to support and protect his followers, and imparted the means of their invocation. Votaries may have chanted liturgies to the divine benefactors during circumambulation. Suitable formulae are found in varied texts, such as the Āṭānāṭiya-sutta, which relates spells that summon the divine benefactors—the guardian kings and their retinues of yakṣas, yakṣinīs, and spirit beings—from the four quarters of the universe, beginning in the east and proceeding clockwise to the south, west, and north, a pattern that corresponds to the starting point and direction of stupa circumambulation.

Stupa reliefs, combined with literary sources and the ethnographic present, help us envision the sensorium and performance modalities of the early South Asian Buddhist world. The sculptural reliefs reflect full somatic engagement as votaries render gestures and postures of devotion. Instrumental music, singing, and the hum of chanting reverberated through the soundscape. The fragrance of incense, sandalwood paste, and tropical blossoms sweetened the air. Twinkling lamps, colorful floral offerings, and gleaming silken banners lent visual vibrancy. Add to this scenario the bustle of vendors catering to pilgrims from afar and the occasional fanfare of a royal cavalcade. Activities reached a crescendo during the celebration of holy days. Buddhists have long observed (lunar) monthly days auspicious for merit-making and a day marking Shakyamuni’s birth, enlightenment, and parinirvāṇa that bring monastics and laity together for elaborate communal outpourings of veneration and lavish donative activity.

Festivals were celebrated across the early South Asian Buddhist world at stupas, monasteries, sites of events commemorated, and public thoroughfares. The consecration of a stupa and ritual displays of relics enjoyed royal patronage. Most of the events, however, were under monastic supervision. Annual festivals were dedicated to votive stupas of Śāriputra and other Arhats on monastery grounds. The end of the annual rain retreat drew laity to the monastery for an all-night ceremony of sutta-recitation, lamp-lighting, and offerings. Monastics held ritual services for sacra in their keeping, such as an annual rite of bathing Buddha images that required multiple scented liquids for lustration, pure silk, and heaps of flowers. The most elaborate ceremonial display was the chariot procession. A Bodhisattva image or other sacra, adorned with silks, precious ornaments, and layers of flower garlands, was installed on a festooned palanquin or many-storied chariot serving as a portable shrine that was drawn through the streets with banners waving high, accompanied by music and drumming. Gregory Schopen’s Vinaya research has revealed the ongoing involvement of monastics in the planning and staging of festivals, sometimes in remote places remarkable only for a marvelous event in the life of Shakyamuni. Considerable organization was required to prepare the site, publicize the event, and arrange for the arrival, feeding, and protocols of hundreds and perhaps thousands of monks and nuns converging for the festival. Administrative offices were even created for the purpose.

Dramatic performances were part of the performative landscape and festival life. Aśvaghoṣa (late first to early second century C.E.) composed several plays on Buddhist themes, crafting the narratives for dramatic enactment with sumptuous portrayal of
the beauties and pleasures to be renounced, scenes requiring music and dance, and Buddhist principles rendered in poetic verse. We know little of the venues in which his plays were performed, but large gatherings of people at festivals were a customary setting for plays in the early centuries of the Common Era. Traveling troupes and solo performers composed plays for specific audiences and festivals. Gregory Schopen found evidence that one such actor, determined to develop a play for a Buddhist festival in Rajagriha, sought and received instruction for his narrative from an erudite nun gifted in eloquence. A Buddhist festival might incorporate plays as an obligatory feature. Schopen also reports of an annual festival commemorating a gift to Shakyamuni by nāgās at which two plays were staged, one of them a play written by nuns and performed by monks.¹⁰

It is increasingly apparent that monastics, performing artists, artisans, and laity devoted their resources and talents to conveying Buddhist ideas and ideals in material and embodied media. Jatakas lent themselves to narration and dramatization. A seventh-century Chinese pilgrim to India reported that stories of Shakyamuni’s previous life, including the Vessantara Jataka, were set to verse and music and enacted as dramas incorporating recitation, acting, singing, and dancing.¹¹ More than a millennium later, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, ethnomusicologist Martina Claus-Bachmann encountered a similarly vibrant performative landscape during her fieldwork in Sri Lanka, namely, “continuous performances of Jataka narratives” by actors, singers, storytellers, and puppeteers in explicitly religious settings (temples, festivals, funerals, pandals) and quasi-secular venues (theaters, television, pop music videos, and recordings).¹² We may surmise that Buddhists across times and locales have employed a full range of expressive media to transmit Dharma with emotionally engaging sensory immediacy.

Mainstays of monastic life may have been memorizing texts, meditative pursuits, and Vinaya adherence, but monks and nuns had a range of clerical responsibilities, in addition to the regular involvement in the festival round discussed earlier. An important ritual role was to act as mediators with the supernatural realm. They were equipped with many means to ward off dangers to themselves, the laity, and the broader locale or region. Foremost among the methods was recitation of spells (paritta) commended by Shakyamuni to secure safety, peace of mind, and well-being by affording protection from all manner of natural and supernatural dangers, such as venomous snakes, wild animals, poisonous insects and plants, disease, and demonic interference.

Monks and nuns maintained cults of yakṣas, yakṣinīs, and nāgas on monastic premises. The supernatural being in question might be an original inhabitant of the monastic site, a being of local import, or a pan-Buddhist figure, such as the great yakṣinī Häriti. Monasteries incorporated painted and sculpted images and shrines, made regular offerings (generally of food) to their nonhuman residents, and supplicated them to guard the monastery and, in the case of nāgas, to ensure timely rainfall.¹³

Monastics served as intercessors on behalf of those who had died, offering rites for transferring merit to deceased relatives to improve their afterlife destiny and for pacifying restless spirits and ghosts that haunt the living. Some monastic sites had
extensive mortuary stupa grounds adjacent to the vihāra. Monks and nuns were also obligated to lend their presence at important domestic events (e.g., celebration of a birth or marriage), the dedication of a construction project (e.g., a dwelling, stable, park, or lotus pond), and a major donation to a stupa (e.g., a pillar, parasol, or banner), on which occasions the monastics performed the ceremonial dedication of merit.

Teachings, practices, and institutional patterns stemming from the earliest documented layers of Buddhism persisted through the Pāla period and had taken root in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia beginning in the third century BCE, where they underwent varied localized trajectories under shifting geopolitical conditions but retained many elements traceable to the early period of Buddhism, including the Pāli language textual tradition.

**MAHAYANA BUDDHISM**

Innovations that came to mark the Mahayana movement had begun to percolate by the first century BCE and were efflorescing by the first century CE. An outpouring of scriptural creativity generated streams of thought and practice that eventually coalesced in what we now call Mahayana. Proponents of Mahayana bequeathed their ideas to us in abundant array, albeit through complex textual histories. Their teachings voice a soaring imagination that opened visionary realms of wonder and vistas of infinite time and space. Their oratory took flight in devotional poesy and elaborate narrative. They introduced a firmament of divinities who served as exemplars of progress on a spiritual path spanning eons and culminating in buddhahood. Under Mahayana purview, the Buddhist imaginaire expanded to encompass innumerable worlds inhabited by countless buddhas and bodhisattvas, equal in number to the grains of sand in the Ganges river and to the atoms in the universe.

The proliferation of enlightened beings and beings well advanced toward enlightenment ushered in new sources of revelation. Shakymuni remained the authoritative source of buddha-vacana, but other speakers of truth came to the fore. Countless bodhisattva-mahāsattvas were endowed with the ability to turn the wheel of Dharma. Laypersons, too, could reveal Dharma through “inspired eloquence” (pratibhāna). Innovative though the new revelations may be, they proclaimed access to the living stream of wisdom at the heart of the tradition.

New developments in the sphere of thought reverberated through the terrain of practice. Mahayana scriptures themselves acquired great sanctity, joining buddhas and stupas as worthy of supreme reverence. By virtue of being suffused with liberating wisdom, a text or portion of a text could serve as a relic, on grounds that the Dharma pulses with the living presence of a buddha just as surely as bodily remains. Hyperbole reigns in discourse on the merit accruing from honoring a given Mahayana scripture, which is greater (as the argument goes) than the merit of making offerings in the presence of a buddha for thousands of years or filling the earth with stupas of gold and jewels.
Ways of honoring a text include the homage and offerings rendered to a buddha or stupa, such as flowers, incense, lamplight, and banners. Powerfully meritorious and transformative effects attend the text as an oral and aural medium. Hearing, memorizing, retaining, reciting, contemplating, copying, and dispensing the text are heralded as fully liberating practices in their own right.\textsuperscript{17} The skilled orator (\textit{dharma-bhāṇaka}) who could recite and illuminate scripture in a compelling manner was a revered figure, worthy of honor as a living repository and voice of the Dharma. A \textit{dharma-bhāṇaka} was to be enthroned, served, and showered with offerings in the same manner as a buddha.\textsuperscript{18}

Whereas the earlier tradition placed Shakyamuni within a sequence of buddhas of ages past and Maitreya, the future Buddha, Mahayana envisioned innumerable Buddhas throughout the cosmos, each inhabiting and presiding over a world, or buddha-field (\textit{buddha-kṣetra}). Earth is the buddha-field of Shakyamuni. Ascending to another buddha-field and continuing one’s spiritual journey in the presence of a buddha became a new focus of practice and aspiration. Abhirati, the realm of Aksobhya, and Sukhāvatī, the realm of Amitābha, came to the fore by the second century CE as paradisal destinations where the fortunate could enjoy heavenly comforts in a land of jeweled splendor and dwell in the radiant presence of the enlightened one. There, they would receive teachings and advance toward buddhahood in surrounds of beauty and plenty, their every need instantly met.

Practices devoted to these buddhas centered on strong aspiration to be reborn in one of those realms and envisioning the realm and its wonders. Intricate scriptural descriptions of the marvels that await—the kaleidoscopically dazzling ever-shifting palette of the trees of precious gems, musical clouds, palatial pavilions, and fragrant breezes—may be intended not simply to describe the buddha-fields but to guide their visualization.\textsuperscript{19} The goal was to be reborn there and continue one’s spiritual journey at the feet of the buddha, without descending again into the six realms of rebirth. Abhirati was the more difficult of access of the two, requiring a vast accumulation of merit. A practitioner sufficiently advanced in meditative disciplines and moral purity to be reborn there would take birth through a brief pregnancy and easeful birth process for the mother. Abhirati served as a launching pad for travel to other worlds to gather wisdom from many buddhas. The goal of Abhirati was eclipsed by that of Sukhāvatī, entrance to which was more readily accessible.\textsuperscript{20} The buddha-fields offer nourishment (whatever food and drink one desires), clothing and adornments growing on trees, and the necessary spiritual sustenance to advance to awakening. Thus, a buddha-field serves as a womb, providing all that is needed for the gestation of a buddha. In addition to meaning “field,” \textit{kṣetra} denotes a “place of origin” and “fertile womb.”

A practitioner need not wait until the next life, however, to come into the presence of a buddha. A meditative discipline termed \textit{buddha-anusmṛti} offered a means to encounter a buddha face-to-face. The practice is to hold a vivid mental image of a given buddha in singular focus, envisioning him enthroned in his buddha-field amid an illustrious assembly and steadily contemplating his virtues, perfections, beauties, and, above all, radiance. The \textit{locus classicus} of this technique, dating from the second century CE, prescribes uninterrupted concentration for seven days and nights. No other ritual is
required, although use of an image to aid visualization is permitted. The goal is to induce a profound meditative state ( señ) in which one is experientially transported to the buddha-field to receive Dharma teachings directly from the buddha while basking in his resplendent presence.21

The practice of dhāraṇī recitation also gained currency. The Mahayana dhāraṇī expanded on the protective role and beneficial properties of the Pāli paritta to encompass fulfillment of soteriological aims.22 The Kāraṇḍavyūha, a circa fifth-century ce scripture featuring Avalokiteśvara, extols his dhāraṇī ( om mani padme hūṃ) as his supreme essence, the essence of Dharma, the highest meditation, and the entrance to liberation. Its recitation confers mental brilliance, the six perfections, highest wisdom, pure compassion, and mastery of liberative skills. Reciters are endowed with such potent liberating power that simply inhaling their breath or brushing by them will set one on the stage of an irreversible bodhisattva. Setting eyes on them frees women, men, children, oxen, deer, and birds from suffering and establishes them as virtuoso yoga practitioners and bodhisattvas in their last samsaric rebirth.23

The maternal matrix of enlightenment received new iterations in Mahayana movements. Female generativity is epitomized by the feminine gender of liberating wisdom as prajñā, the source and “mother” of all enlightened ones ( sarva-buddha-mātā) and her personification as a goddess, Prajñāpāramitā, the overarching cosmic reality and eternal wisdom that gives birth to buddhas.24 The dhāraṇī, too, is a female generative source. The efficacy attributed to dhāraṇī is based on a long-standing principle of South Asian metaphysics that sound is a primary creative force that operates at the subllest levels of reality in the form of vibrational waves that give rise to denser, tangible phenomena. The term dhāraṇī is a feminine noun derived from a verbal root ( dhr) whose meanings have a range of female connotations in reference to the roles of bearing, giving birth, and sustaining life. Thus, the feminine gender of the word accords with the generative power of recitation, which yields every spiritual goal, including supreme awakening. A synonym for dhāraṇī is vidyā, another feminine noun. The six-syllable spell of Avalokiteśvara in the Kāraṇḍavyūha is often hailed as the “queen of great vidyās” and is personified in the work as a white goddess holding a rosary of jewels for recitation practice.25

The stupa-womb is the forerunner and arguably the prototype of tathāgata-garbha (“buddha-womb”), a teaching that found authoritative expression in a circa third-century ce scripture revealed by Queen Śrīmālā Devī to her female retinue and attendants, after which she led all the women of her city onto the Mahayana path, followed by the king and male citizenry. The queen taught that every being is a “womb” (garbha) in which resides the pure essence of a buddha ( tathāgata). Until the buddhahood is realized, it remains an “embryo” (also garbha). The queen universalizes the womb, proclaiming the tathāgata-garbha to be “the womb of the Dharma realm, the womb of the Dharma body, the womb of the supramundane, the womb of intrinsic purity.”26 She asserts that the tathāgata-womb has no beginning or end, casting it as the source of all: phenomenal arising, living beings, enlightened beings. In Mahayana more broadly, reality ( dharma-dhātu) has the qualities of a womb. Emptiness is akin to a womb as the matrix of infinite
potentiality, giving rise to the stream of insubstantial, interdependent, impermanent (i.e., empty)—and ultimately pure—phenomena. The arising of phenomena is nuanced with the insight that, in an ultimate sense, there is no arising and hence phenomena are “unborn,” meaning that phenomena unfold within and yet never leave the womb, making all of reality, the vast realm of Dharma (dharma-dhātu), the womb.

In the Gaṇḍavyūha, Sudhana’s quest for enlightenment unfolds in a womblike environment suffused with feminine wisdom and compassion, populated by female divinities, and replete with female guides. The female divinities express their compassion through trees, flowers, ponds, rivers, caves, and clouds; they voice their wisdom through water, wind, ocean wave, and birdsong. The aspect of nature most akin to the womb is the night sky, which is dark and vitally alive. The nocturnal firmament is radiant with goddesses (devatā) who manifest as celestial bodies to protect travelers and impart wisdom gleaned from lifetimes of spiritual purification and the vast panorama of their vision. Sudhana’s illuminating encounters with night goddesses occupy a quarter of the narrative with exultations of their beauty, lofty realizations, and illustrious discourse. The same work glorifies the womb of Mayadevi as a magnificent jeweled pavilion of cosmic expanse in which countless bodhisattvas complete their journey to awakening within the harmonious, luminous weave of phenomenal reality.

Late Mahayana, or what is increasingly recognized as the proto-Tantric phase, saw the emergence of a new genre of practice in texts dating from the mid-fifth through seventh centuries ce. Dhāraṇī practice remained central. The new development was an elaborate ritual technology to invoke a deity into the ritual space. Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, and Vajrapāṇi recur in the revelation scenarios, while the deities to be invoked were mainly figures of non-Buddhist genesis, such as Lakṣmi, Sarasvatī, and an array of yakṣinīs endowed with distinctive identities in this context. Ritual details vary, but the general pattern is to prepare a seat for the arrival of the deity in a specified place (e.g., on the ground, in a cave, by a river) and assemble the offerings to be rendered, such as ghee lamps, incense, food, and flowers. The practitioner draws, paints, sculpts, or commissions an image of the deity. Visualization (creating a mental image) and ceremonial hand gestures (mudrā) do not have a role. The focus is on dhāraṇī recitation in requisite number (e.g., 1,008, 8,000, or 100,000) for a specified duration (e.g., nightly from full moon to full moon). If the rite has been performed correctly, the deity will appear and confer promised benefactions, fulfill requests, or grant extraordinary powers.

Vajrayana has as its doctrinal edifice the teachings of preceding centuries. Tantric scriptures regularly refer to non-self, the four brahmavihāra, emptiness, compassion, nondual wisdom, and attainment of buddhahood as the goal. Buddhahood, however, was no longer a distant goal to be attained after eons of practice, but rather a transformation attainable in the present lifetime and body. The practice landscape shifted
accordingly. As an accelerated path, Vajrayana offers methods designed for intensive karmic purification, toward the aim of fully embodying buddhahood. Vajrayana raised esteem for the body as a locus of immense resources and divine qualities, glorifying the human body as a microcosm in which all the energies and powers throughout the universe are present. Different Tantric systems mapped the internal cosmos and geography differently, but they share the vision of the body as a universe within. The varied Tantric deities and methods (mantra, visualization, subtle body yoga) offer multiple templates and routes for full transformation, a transformation expressed in Tantric terms as attaining the body, speech, and mind of a buddha.

From an ultimate perspective, the Vajrayana path is one of revealing innate divinity. From an experiential perspective, however, a dramatic apotheosis will occur: a new being, an enlightened being, will be born. The womb for the gestation of the divine body is the mandala, an evolution of the stupa. A mandala is envisioned and ritually constructed in three-dimensional form, but when represented in two-dimensional form (as a diagram, painting, or sand mandala), the resemblance to the stupa becomes clear. The center, the location of the relics in the stupa, becomes the seat of the deity in the mandala. Both have a circular surround and four gates in the cardinal directions, with the point of entry in the east. The clockwise circumambulation of the stupa becomes the clockwise meditative path through the mandala. Whereas the stupa enshrines relics, the mandala provides an environment through which the practitioner journeys, eventually to reach the center. The sectors, retinue figures, and imagery represent psycho-physiological dynamics that will be purified of egoic toxicity and transformed into divine qualities and powers.

The womblike nature of the mandala is conveyed by the lotus on which a mandala rests. The lotus has a feminine association that extends deep into the substrate of Vedic and Upanishadic thought as the womb from which the world is born and the support on which the world then rests. A lotus and the primordial waters in which it is rooted are the primary conditions of life. The lotus, as the womb of the world, is likened to the human womb and serves as its emblem (yoni-rūpatvam) in visual imagery. The female association of the lotus was amplified in Vajrayana, wherein elements that are unified through Tantric practice, such as wisdom and skillful means, or bliss and emptiness, are expressed as male-female pairings in which the female element is represented by a lotus and the male by a vajra. In Tantric scripture as well, the vulva is referred to as “lotus” (padma). In mandala symbolism, the lotus is the foundation of the new world into which the practitioner will take birth as the presiding deity. The meaning of purity that accrued to the lotus is also present as the purifying nature of the mandala journey, which culminates in the purity of vision that reveals the world as it truly is, as the sacred realm of perfection, beauty, and harmony represented by the mandala.

Primary generative source as female finds many expressions in Vajrayana metaphysics, symbolism, and ritual. Mantra recitation is an essential Vajrayana practice, directing the creative power of sound to specific ritual aims and to the attainment of buddhahood. The root source of mantras (and all language) is the Sanskrit letter “a”
(pronounced “ah”), the release of breath required to vocalize, whether to speak or to recite. "A" is the first letter of the Sanskrit alphabet, recognizing its primacy. In the Vajrayana pantheon, “a” is personified by the female Buddha Nairātmyā. Her body is blue, the color of infinite space. She is universal and all-pervading, the unbounded consciousness that encompasses all. She is the dharma-dhātu, the spacious expanse in which illusory phenomena momentarily shimmer. She is the space of breath (“ah”), the primary sound and source of all others and the realities they shape. Whereas ordinary language and the dualism it entails generate samsaric realities, mantras purify awareness and reveal the sacred realities represented by the mandalas and deities.  

A range of other liberating powers are cast in explicitly female terms and personified by female deities in the Tantric pantheon. Wisdom as female force and maternal source received new emphasis. The ascent of Vajrayana brought a resurgence of interest in Prajñāpāramitā texts in the ninth century ce. A high proportion of illuminated palm leaf manuscripts produced between the tenth and twelfth centuries are Aṣṭa-sahasrikā-prajñāpāramitā texts. The costly, time-consuming production of an illuminated manuscript required the largesse of a wealthy or royal purse to sponsor the labor for its planning, manufacture, and copying and the materials, time, and artistic effort to illustrate its folia with diminutive, meticulously rendered paintings. The selection of this early Prajñāpāramitā text for illumination and ritual veneration endorses the generative nature of the work as the primary expression of liberating wisdom and honors the wisdom goddess whom it extols. As Jinah Kim has demonstrated, the portrayal of the goddess in a given manuscript casts her as the emanating source of the scenes and figures of awakening that animate its leaves. Events of Shakyamuni’s life, pilgrimage sites, celestial bodhisattvas, and esoteric deities bear no relation to the content of the text. Their inclusion illustrates the role of Prajñāpāramitā as the source of the enlightenment that flows from her illuminating presence.

Wisdom was in turn homologized with another primary force of transformation envisioned as female, the inner heat, or fire, of yogic purification (caṇḍālī) that is kindled in the navel chakra in esoteric yoga practice and spread through the subtle body, incinerating karmic dross just as transcendent wisdom (prajñā) dissolves dualistic conceptuality. The inner flame, too, is personified as a goddess that shares its name, Caṇḍāli.

Vajrayoginī, the supreme female Buddha in many Tantric lineages, encompasses all creative, liberating, transforming powers. She is the focus of several Tantric scriptures and mandalas, numerous rituals, and dozens of sādhanas, not counting those in which she is paired with a consort or those introduced beyond the South Asian purview. She wears a garland of fifty-one heads, the number of letters in the Sanskrit alphabet, representing her mastery of the creative power of sound, language, and mantra. She blazes bright with flames of wisdom that consume delusion and burns hot with the transforming heat of yogic purification. Vajrayoginī is a cosmogonic figure, the one from whom the universe is born and into whom it dissolves. Her womb, as the universal source, is represented in geometric form as a red, downward-pointing triangle. The triangular shape is an abstract rendering of the pudendum, the threshold of creation,
while red is the prototypically female color in Tantric symbolism. Termed dharmodayā, “source of all things,” her womb is a common feature of ritual construction of a mandala, regardless of the deity on whom the mandala centers. The dharmodayā (sometimes doubled, sometimes containing a lotus design) is typically drawn with red powder on a cleared and cleansed surface to serve as the base on which the mandala will be formed, visually expressing and ritually invoking the source of the world to be created, the mandala in which the practitioner will be transformed and reborn as a deity. Thus, her womb is the source for the rebirth of the practitioner in a divine mode of bodily being on earth. Vajrayoginī also presides over a favored paradisal afterlife destination for Vajrayana practitioners, a blissful realm inhabited by dākinīs in rainbow array, ever celebrating the victory of awakening with supernal dance and song. A practitioner who has sufficiently purified his or her subtle body may ascend directly to her realm at death, dissolving into rainbow light and leaving no bodily remains.

Alongside its meditative and metaphysical pursuits, Buddhism has been a prodigious producer of material culture, shaping landscapes with pilgrimage routes and monuments, constructing worship and practice spaces, crafting votive and ritual objects, and generating hand-copied and printed texts. New evidence of Buddhist practice is continuously brought to light by archaeological discoveries, newly unearthed caches of manuscripts, and analysis of objects and sites with scientific techniques (e.g., carbon dating, radiography, GPS mapping, forensic palynology). Digital archives of sites, images, texts, and textual translations put masses of data at scholars’ fingertips and accelerate the pace of research, collaboration, and dissemination. The burgeoning record provides a wealth of evidence so staggering in its abundance and complexity that its interpretation will engage scholars for time to come, ever expanding and refining our understanding of Buddhist practices, past and present.

Notes

1. South Asia is variously defined in different classificatory systems (geographical, cultural, economic, political, historical, and contemporary) and may encompass adjacent countries and islands such as Afghanistan, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka.
2. Extant portions of Bhārhat (Madhya Pradesh), Bhūteśvara (Uttar Pradesh), Sanghol (Punjab), and Sanchi Stupa 1 (Madhya Pradesh) form the composite from which my interpretations derive. Contemporaneous sites further afield, in Gandhāra, Andhra Pradesh (Amarāvatī), and Karnataka (Kanaganahalli), warrant site-specific consideration and comparison.
3. The tumulus burial is not limited to South Asia, but is documented globally, particularly during the Neolithic and Megalithic periods and continuing in some areas into the Bronze and Iron Ages and beyond.
5. For documentation of the full range of practices, see Susan L. Huntington, Lay Ritual in Early Buddhist Art: More Evidence against the Aniconic Theory (Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2012).


16. For helpful summation of the textual genealogies that challenge a search for an “original” text, see Daniel Boucher, “What Do We Mean by ‘Early’ in the Study of Early Mahāyāna—and Should We Care?” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, n.s., 23 (2009): 33–41.


27. Shaw, Buddhist Goddesses of India, chap. 7. A third of the text is devoted to goddesses as primary guides, additional goddesses appear throughout, and Mayadevi is exalted to cosmic status.

28. Slightly more than a quarter of the pilgrimage account is devoted to meetings with night goddesses. For discussion of them and implications of their spatial arrangement in a mandala formation, see Douglas Osto, Power, Wealth and Women in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Gaṇḍavyuha-sutra (New York: Routledge, 2008), 23, 88, 97–100, 122–23.


32. Shaw, Buddhist Goddesses of India, chap. 17.


34. Kim, Receptacle of the Sacred, chaps. 2–5.


Further Reading


In recent decades, scholars of Buddhism have come to the increasing realization that “Buddhist Studies” as a discipline of Western knowledge creation was established on a set of premises with roots in Protestant theology that, especially when combined with orientalism, have greatly distorted the perception of Buddhism in the West. In particular, the Protestant emphasis on scripture as the locus of “true religion,” the rejection of tradition, and the devaluation of ritual and thus “practice” in general led early Buddhologists to focus on the earliest texts in their construction of knowledge about Buddhism, largely ignoring or subordinating actual Buddhist practice in the present and even in the past, in proportion to its distance from the time of the Buddha. When their construction of “Buddhism” clashed with actual Buddhist practice, their orientalist prejudices against Asian Buddhist actors made it easy for them to dismiss the latter as a degeneration of “true Buddhism,” the product of the fanciful and infantile “oriental mind.”

Perhaps no form of traditional Buddhism has been more affected by this Protestantizing and orientalist legacy than that which has come to be called “Theravada Buddhism,” the predominant form of Buddhism found in Southeast Asia today. The reason for this lies in the fact that Theravada Buddhists look to the Tipiṭaka (“Triple Basket”) in Pali as their authoritative set of scriptures, rather than the later Mahayana sutras written in Sanskrit. Once European scholars in the mid-nineteenth century identified the Pali texts of the Tipiṭaka as the oldest Buddhist textual sources, they became the locus of Western efforts to (re)construct “true Buddhism.” Concomitantly, Theravada Buddhism came to be seen as the “earliest” and “purest” form of Buddhism. But this “Theravada Buddhism” was of course not primarily the Buddhism practiced in Sri Lanka and mainland Southeast Asia; it was an abstraction equated with early (Indian) Buddhism, bearing a mostly unexamined relationship with actual contemporary practice in Southeast Asia. This uncritical and fallacious equation of “Theravada Buddhism” with “early Buddhism” is still sometimes found within Buddhology today,
especially among more philologically inclined scholars who do not specialize in Southeast Asia. The theoretical basis for the study of Southeast Asian Buddhism is the rejection of this equation, allowing space for the study of Theravada Buddhism on its own terms as a contemporary and recent historical phenomenon of the second millennium CE, with reference to the actual practices of Buddhists in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, independent of what the Pali texts supposedly say Theravada Buddhists do and believe.

In part as a reflection of the need to overcome the persistent conflation of “Theravada” with “early Buddhism,” but also for the sake of space, I will present in this chapter an account of Southeast Asian Buddhist practice that is mostly synchronic, rooted in the present and recent past. In addition, the scope of my essay will not map exactly onto “Southeast Asia” as defined in solely physical geographical terms. Rather, my focus will be on the forms of Buddhism that have come in the modern period to be known as “Theravada.” The physical and demographic center of gravity of Theravada Buddhism is firmly within Southeast Asia, as four of the five major Theravada countries (Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia) are in mainland Southeast Asia. The fifth, Sri Lanka, is an island just off the coast of India in South Asia, but given the extensive ties between the sangha in Sri Lanka and those in mainland Southeast Asia going back nearly 1,000 years, as well as the prestige that Lanka has held in the Southeast Asian Buddhist imaginary for as much time, it is impossible to discuss Southeast Asian Buddhism without reference to Sri Lanka. Vietnam, on the other hand, will not be discussed in this chapter, in spite of being part of mainland Southeast Asia. With the exception of ethnic Khmers near the border with Cambodia who practice Theravada Buddhism, most Vietnamese practice Mahayana forms of Buddhism that are heavily Sinicized due to historic links with China. Readers interested in Vietnam are therefore referred to Chapter 4 on East Asian Buddhism.

I will begin with an overview of Southeast Asian practice, including a bit of historical background and a synchronic account of Theravada Buddhist practice today. This will then be followed by several short discussions of important trends and themes in scholarship on Southeast Asian Buddhist practice.

**Overview**

**The Religio-Historical Geography of Southeast Asia**

Pali Buddhism historically has been but one player in a very complex history of religion in Southeast Asia that led to the religious geography we find there today. Trade with South Asia in the first millennium CE led to the adoption across Southeast Asia, both mainland and insular, of a variety of cultural traits and systems from South Asia, many of which in modern eyes could be termed “religious.” An earlier generation of scholars
referred to this process as “Indianization”; today, scholars prefer to use the term “localization” to emphasize the agency of Southeast Asians in this process. In any case, the adoption of South Asian “religious” practices, beliefs, and motifs was quite eclectic and not limited to any one form of Buddhism or even Buddhism itself. Thus, in the first millennium CE, and continuing into the first few centuries of the second millennium, we find depictions of and references to not only the Buddha, but also Viṣṇu, Śiva, other “Hindu” gods, Mahayana bodhisattvas, and even deities of Buddhist Tantra.

During the first millennium CE, Pali Buddhism was confined to the Pyu people of the Irrawaddy Valley in what is now Myanmar, followed by the Burmese who established Bagan in that area in the ninth century, and the (probably Mon) people of what is conventionally known as “Dvāravatī,” in the Chaophraya Valley of what is now Thailand. A variety of circumstances in the first few centuries after the turn of the second millennium conspired to make Pali Buddhism dominant in mainland Southeast Asia and thus create the “Theravada world” as it exists today. First, Tai-speaking peoples began migrating south and west from their homeland in the border region between what is now northern Vietnam and Guangxi Province in China, adopting Pali-medium Buddhism in the process. This led to the establishment of four major Tai polities in central mainland Southeast Asia, all of which patronized Pali Buddhism: Lan Xang in what is now Lao, Lanna in what is now northern Thailand, Sukhothai in what is now central Thailand, and Siam around the Gulf of Thailand. The early history of the last of these polities, Siam, is poorly understood, but it appears that its rise represented a shift in power in the old Khmer sphere of influence, away from the old inland capital of Angkor toward maritime polities closer to the coast (Siam and Phnom Penh). Siam retained much of its older Khmer culture, but became increasingly “Tai-ified,” especially in the fifteenth century as it merged with Sukhothai. Pali Buddhism became dominant not only in Siam, but also (perhaps under the influence of increasingly powerful Siam) in the more central Khmer realms to the east.

In the late twelfth century, King Parākramabāhu I (r. 1153–1186) of the Polonnaruwa kingdom in Lanka undertook a “reform” of the sangha on the island in which he recognized only one monastic nikāya, that of the Mahāvihāra, as legitimate, and forced all other monks to re-ordain in that lineage or disrobe. Other nikāyas, most importantly the Abhayagiri, had participated in Sanskrit-medium developments in Buddhism on the mainland, most importantly the Mahayana. The Mahāvihāra, on the other hand, had throughout the first millennium been more conservative and anti-cosmopolitan in outlook, sticking to its older texts in Pali. Parākramabāhu’s reform, however, thrust the Mahāvihāra into a cosmopolitan role, as monks who practiced Pali-oriented forms of Buddhism in Southeast Asia (Burmese, Mon, Tai, and Khmer) came to Lanka to re-ordain in the newly purified lineage and then return home to re-ordain other monks and establish “Lankan” lineages there. This new cosmopolitan relationship between Lanka and Southeast Asian polities that looked to Lanka as a center of monastic purity led to a renaissance in Pali culture, with the sudden efflorescence of Pali literature after a hiatus of hundreds of years, especially grammatical literature that often was written in imitation of earlier Sanskrit grammatical literature. Moreover, the prestige of Lanka in
this newly emergent “Pali cosmopolis” was rooted in what, ironically, was originally the 
least cosmopolitan of the Lankan nikāyas, which had therefore eschewed developments in 
first-millennium Buddhism, namely the Mahayana and Vajrayana. It therefore 
bequeathed to modern “Theravada Buddhism,” at least on the normative level, a “prim-
itive” and non-Mahayana identity, which unfortunately played into the conflation of 
“Theravada Buddhism” with “early Buddhism” in early Western scholarship.

The geography of Theravada Buddhism today maps roughly, but not exactly, onto 
national boundaries. Its practice is widely spread among Sinhala, Burmese, Mon, 
Tai, and Khmer ethnic groups. It is therefore the majority religion in Sri Lanka (major-
ity Sinhala), Myanmar (majority Burmese and minority Mon), Laos (majority 
Tai), Thailand (majority Tai and minority Mon), and Cambodia (majority Khmer). Contiguous with this five-country core, it is also a minority religion practiced by Tai 
groups in Bangladesh, southern China, and northern Malaysia, as well as ethnic Khmers 
in southern Vietnam.4

Theravada Buddhist Practice

Theravada Buddhism today can be defined as that form of Buddhism that uses Pali as its 
sacred language, looks to the Tipiṭaka and other texts preserved in Pali as authoritative, 
and at least normatively is the only surviving form of Buddhism that does not self-iden-
tify as Mahayana. These qualities should be understood not as innate, but as emerging 
historically from the Pali cosmopolis of the second millennium CE. Nevertheless, they 
do describe the rough contours of Buddhist practice in the “Theravada world.” Certain 
shared features can be found throughout the Theravada Buddhist world due to the 
Pali cosmopolis. The lack of any central authority, however, has ensured that there is 
considerable regional and local variation in Theravada Buddhist practice. The only 
centralizing forces in Theravada Buddhism have been the appointment of saṅgharājas 
and monastic reforms performed by kings at the regional level. Sri Lanka has a unique 
regional Theravada culture due to its physical isolation from the rest of the Theravada 
world. In mainland Southeast Asia, one can see a regional split between the Burmese 
cultural sphere to the west and the Tai/Lao and Khmer cultural sphere to the east. The 
latter, while broad and involving several countries and ethnic groups, bears a certain 
amount of unity due to the historical significance of Siam, which itself arose out of a fu-
sion of Tai and Khmer cultures and came to have hegemony over other Tai and Khmer 
polities at a crucial point in the nineteenth century. Even within a single modern nation-
state, however, one finds particular regional variation to this day.

The focal point of practice for most Theravada Buddhists is the local temple. The 
word “temple” here refers to religious compounds referred to as wat or vat in the Tai-
Lao-Khmer cultural sphere, kyaung in the Burmese cultural sphere, and vihāraya in Sri 
Lanka. Usually, these religious compounds can be considered simultaneously “temples” 
and “monasteries.” They are “temples” insofar as they provide an opportunity for public
Buddhist worship, almost always in the form of a Buddha image or images, and often with stupas (more commonly referred to as cetiyas in mainland Southeast Asia) as well (Figure 3.1). They are “monasteries” insofar as they house monks. There are some Theravada “temples” that are not “monasteries” (i.e., they do not house monks), and there are some Theravada “monasteries” that are not “temples” (i.e., they house monks but provide no opportunity for public worship), but for the sake of simplicity I will use the term “temple” here to refer to the vast majority that perform both functions.

Theravada temple architecture displays great architectural variation, especially among the three zones I defined earlier, but also within each of the three zones. Generally speaking, they will include residential spaces for monks and at least one prominent Buddha image for public worship, often with many other images and stupas as well. In addition, Theravada temples that have the requisite number of monks in residence will include a special area defined by a simā-boundary, as described in the Pali Vinaya. This area is used for special acts of the sangha, most importantly the recitation of the pāṭimokkha (the 227 rules followed by Theravada monks) on uposatha days and the ordination of new monks. In mainland Southeast Asia, the simā area is usually a formal structure that serves as the primary “sanctuary” of the temple. In Sri Lanka, however, the simā area may be open-air.

The primary “clergy” of Theravada Buddhism are the monks (bhikkhu in Pali) that reside in each temple. As with monks in most Buddhist traditions, Theravada Buddhist
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monks completely shave the hair off their heads. Also like other Buddhist monks, they wear distinctive robes. In Theravada traditions, monks wear a “triple robe” that is intended to conform to canonical prescriptions, to a greater degree than is found in Mahayana traditions. Still, the degree of adherence to, and interpretation of, canonical descriptions of the robes and how to wear them is hotly contested within Theravada monastic lineages and has frequently been a marker of nikāya differences. The most obvious variation found in Theravada robes is color. Monks in the Tai-Lao-Khmer cultural sphere tend to wear robes that are an orange or yellowish color. Monks in the Burmese cultural sphere, on the other hand, tend to wear robes that a reddish color, and monks in Sri Lanka tend to wear robes of a color corresponding to whether they belong to the Siyam Nikāya or one of the Burmese-derived nikāyas.

All Theravada monks theoretically belong to a single “Theravada” nikāya insofar as they all follow the same Vinaya preserved in Pali. This Vinaya and its associated nikāya is one of only three with surviving lineages today, the other two being the Mūlasarvāstivāda (Tibet/Mongolia) and the Dharmaguptaka (East Asia). As in other traditions, there are two levels of ordination for Theravada monks. The first, pabbajjā, allows one to become a “novice” (sāmaṇerā), who follows ten precepts. The higher ordination, upasampadā, allows one to become a fully ordained monk, or bhikkhu, who follows the entire pāṭimokkha, which in the Pali Vinaya contains 227 rules. One must be twenty years old to receive the higher ordination, but the age for lower ordination is defined vaguely by the Vinaya as “old enough to scare crows away,” which is interpreted in various ways. Often very young boys will live in robes in Theravada temples, either because they are orphans or to receive an education.

Conformity to the rules of pāṭimokkha is perhaps a greater concern among Theravada monks than those of Mahayana traditions, but there is still room for interpretation, as well as some notable exceptions. Theravada monks generally speaking do not eat after noon, in accordance with the Vinaya prescription, although there is wide latitude for consuming “liquids” and “medicine.” Unlike many East Asian monks, Theravada monks usually do eat meat, which, contrary to popular belief in the West, was allowed by the Buddha as long as the animal was not killed specifically for the sake of the monk being fed. With the exception of a very small number of “forest monks” who undertake the dhutaṅga practice of wandering in the forest nine months out of the year, Theravada monks generally reside in a temple year-round. Still, the three-month vassa or “rains retreat” is ceremonially observed in Theravada countries, and monks’ movement is generally restricted during that time. In spite of the fact that the handling of gold and silver by monks is prohibited in the Vinaya, most Theravada monks do use money, although there may be arrangements in place to ritually avoid their direct handling of currency.

Although all Theravada monks theoretically belong to a single nikāya insofar as they all follow the same Vinaya, in practice they are divided into separate ordination lineages that are themselves referred to as nikāyas. Most of these nikāyas have their origins in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. In Thailand and Cambodia, there are two major nikāyas: the Thammayut and the Mahānikāi. The Thammayut was founded in the nineteenth century in Siam by the man who was to become King Mongkut (Rāma IV), and the majority of monks who did not join this reformist lineage became known as the Mahānikāi. Since Siam
asserted hegemony over Laos and Cambodia at that time, the Thammayut-Mahānikāyā division spread to those countries as well and remained after Siam ceded them to the French. This division in the sangha still exists today in Cambodia, but after the communist Pathet Lao took control of Laos in the 1970s, it abolished nikāya distinctions and nationalized the sangha as an organ of the state. In Myanmar, there are several nikāyas, but only two major ones: the Thudhamma Nikāya, established by King Bodawpaya (r. 1782–1819), and the Shwegyin Nikāya, founded by the Shwegyin Sayadaw during the reign of King Mindon (1853–1878). Higher ordination lineages in Sri Lanka died out by the eighteenth century; all three existing nikāyas in Sri Lanka derive from the reimportation of lineages of higher ordination from mainland Southeast Asia. The oldest, the Siyam Nikāya, was founded in 1753 from a Siamese lineage; the other two are Burmese: the Amarapura Nikāya, founded in 1803, and the Rāmañña Nikāya, founded in 1864.5

The Pali Vinaya, like all Vinayas, recounts the Buddha's establishment of an order of fully ordained nuns, called bhikkunīs, and contains a pāṭimokkha of 311 rules, plus the eight garudhammā imposed on the Buddha's aunt Mahāpajāpatī at the foundation of the order. All bhikkhuni lineages following the Pali Vinaya, however, died out many centuries ago. It appears that there were bhikkhuni lineages until the eleventh century in Lanka and until the thirteenth century in Burma. To the east of the Burmese cultural area, there is only scant evidence that an order of fully ordained nuns might have once existed in Cambodia.6 In the absence of a bhikkhuni order, some women live a monastic lifestyle in Theravada countries under a lower form of ordination, taking either eight or ten precepts. These “precept nuns” are called dasasilmātā in Sri Lanka and wear robes similar to those of monks; in Burma, they are called thilashin and wear pink, brown, or yellow robes; and in the Tai-Lao-Khmer cultural area, they wear white and are called either mae chi (Tai) or don chi (Khmer). There are far fewer precept nuns than monks, and their life is often difficult because they receive less respect and thus less material support from laypeople. Since the late 1980s, attempts have been made to reinstate the bhikkhuni order, but they have been controversial. While ordinations of monks require a quorum only of already ordained monks, ordinations of nuns require a quorum of both monks and nuns, posing a quandary when the order of nuns has died out. Recent ordinations of bhikkunīs have fulfilled the quorum using nuns from the only surviving bhikṣuṇī lineage, the Dharmaguptaka of East Asia. This approach has been most successful in Sri Lanka. Ten Sri Lanka women, led by Kusuma Devendra, were ordained in Sarnath in 1996, and now over 1,000 nuns have been ordained in their lineage, receiving varying degrees of popular support. In defiance of the fact that the conservative state-supported sanghas of Myanmar and Thailand have rejected their validity, women from other Theravada countries have also ordained in the newly rekindled Sri Lankan lineage.7

Theravada monastics, the vast majority of them male, have an important ritual role to play as a “field of merit,” but in terms of motivation and practice, they should be seen as in continuity with ordinary laypeople. This is particularly true given that most Theravada monks do not remain ordained for life. In mainland Southeast Asia, in fact, it is completely culturally acceptable, and in fact encouraged of young men before they marry, to ordain temporarily, even for as short a time as a few months or days. In Sri Lanka, the cultural expectation is that monks will ordain for life, but the reality is that Sri Lankan
monks disrobe at about the same rate as those in mainland Southeast Asia. The old textbook generalizations that Buddhist monks are completely detached from society, or that “monks meditate, laypeople donate,” bear little resemblance to the reality on the ground. Meditation is not the primary pursuit of most monks, and few enter the order with the expectation that they will attain nibbāna in this life. The most common motivation for ordination is to make merit, both for oneself and for one’s relatives. Given the restricted options for women’s ordination, it is common for a son to ordain at the death of his mother, leading to the saying in Thailand that “a woman goes to heaven clinging to the monastic robes of her son.” Monks may have other mundane motivations for ordaining, including getting an education or simply having a place to live if they are poor.

Most practitioners of Theravada Buddhism are of course neither monks nor nuns, but laypeople. The practice of ordinary laypeople revolves around the making of merit (puñña), both to improve one’s circumstances in this life and to ensure a favorable rebirth. Although theoretically any good deed counts as merit, merit-making tends to focus specifically on saṅghadāna, or donations to the sangha. The most everyday form of saṅghadāna is giving food to monks (Figure 3.2).

**Figure 3.2.** Monks going on an alms round in Salaya, Thailand.

Photo: Nathan McGovern.
This can be done from one’s own home when the monks go on their early-morning alms-round; alternatively, one can arrange to feed all the monks of a temple lunch (usually served around 11:00 a.m.) at the temple itself. Given traditional gender roles, women play an outsized role in this type of merit-making. Aside from the giving of food, which is the most ritualized form of merit-making, one can also make merit as one wishes by donating robes, household goods, buildings, Buddha images, or simply cash to the sangha or (as appropriate) a particular monastic.

Laypeople tend to go to the temple to worship the Buddha and make merit on annual cultural and religious holidays, their own birthday, and whenever they have the fancy. At the bare minimum, laypeople visiting a temple will prostrate themselves three times before the main Buddha image and usually make some sort of offering to the image (candles, joss sticks, flowers). There are usually collection boxes for simple monetary donations, but often laypeople prefer to make donations, even of cash, more formally to monastics.

The “liturgies” employed by monastics when laypeople come to make merit vary widely by both occasion and location. The biggest common denominator is that prayers are recited in Pali, although they may in some cases also be recited in the local vernacular. Sermons are given when there are large numbers of laypeople in attendance and are of course given in the vernacular. Most ceremonies involving laypeople will begin with the prayer \textit{namo tassa bhavagato arahato sammāsambuddhassa} (“Homage to the Blessed One, the Worthy One, the Rightly Self-Awakened One”), recited three times, followed by the triple refuge (to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha), recited three times, followed in turn by the taking of the five precepts (to abstain from killing, stealing, wrong speech, sexual misconduct, and intoxicants). The “term of validity” of these precepts may be understood as being quite short, especially for the last of the five, since the consumption of alcohol is quite common in Theravada countries. Another common prayer recited by Theravada laypeople is the \textit{iti pi so} formula that lists the qualities of the Buddha. If the visiting laypeople have formally made \textit{saṅghadāna}, there will likely be a ceremony for the transfer of merit to one’s dead relatives. This ceremony involves pouring water from a cup or small cruet into a bowl or the ground while the monastics chant in Pali. The whole transfer of merit in these ceremonies is conceived of in quite physical terms. Monastics are understood to generate sacred power, especially through the chanting of Pali verses. This power can be transmitted through direct contact, or through a string that is held by the monks while they chant and then tied directly to the laypeople or submerged in water, which is in turn sprinkled on the laypeople by a monk, much like Catholic holy water.

The largest crowds of laypeople are drawn to the temple on annual festivals and holidays. These vary by country and even by region within each country. In addition, the holidays that draw laypeople may not be specifically “Buddhist.” For example, now that the Western calendar has been adopted, many laypeople go to the temple on December 31 or January 1 because they want to start the year by making merit. All five
Theravada countries also have a traditional New Year that falls in the middle of April and is a common time to visit the temple. This traditional New Year is shared with certain parts of India (including Tamil Nadu) and appears to reflect the very old cultural world shared between South and Southeast Asia. Likewise, one finds various festivals of lights celebrated late in the year in Theravada countries, similar to Dīwālī festivals in India. Particularly important is the Loi Krathong festival celebrated in Thailand and by other Tai peoples in November. Within a strictly Buddhist calendar of the year, the first day of the rains retreat and the last day of the rains retreat, followed by the kaṭhina ceremony for donating monastic robes, have a particular significance. There are also certain holidays corresponding to events in the Buddha’s life. The most important of these is Vesākha Pūjā, observed according to the lunar calendar in April or May. It commemorates the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment, and death, which are supposed to have occurred on the exact same date of the lunar calendar. This holiday is celebrated extravagantly in Sri Lanka, but it is of far lesser importance in mainland Southeast Asia.

Finally, it should be noted that Theravada Buddhist practice is fully integrated with a variety of practices that, according to the very limited modern paradigm of “world religions,” may appear religious but not Buddhist. Buddhism is, like Christianity, a universalist religion that does not simply involve local traditions for negotiating with supernatural agents, but rather makes general claims over all supernatural agents. Unlike Christianity, however, Buddhism did not go through a phase in which the very existence of most supernatural agents came to be denied—with the exception of Buddhist Modernism, more influential in Sri Lanka than in mainland Southeast Asia, which developed directly under the influence of Protestant Christianity and post-Protestant Enlightenment rationalism. Generally speaking, Buddhism does not deny the existence of gods and spirits; rather, it subordinates all such supernatural beings to the Buddha by regarding them, like animals and human beings, as trapped in samsara, subject to the law of karma and eventually to death and rebirth. Supernatural beings may still live a long time and have superhuman powers, making them, aside from their technical lack of immortality, indistinguishable from such beings in polytheistic traditions. Although there is some controversy over doing so, even in traditional (non-modernist) contexts, Theravada Buddhists may worship and otherwise negotiate with supernatural beings, sometimes using technologies provided by the Buddhist sangha and sometimes others provided by lay specialists. The supernatural beings in question include local spirits (phi in the Tai cultures, neak ta in Cambodia, and the nats in Burma), as well as Hindu gods (especially Brahmā and Indra, who are mentioned in the Pali Tipiṭaka, but also Śiva, Viṣṇu, and forms of the Goddess). In addition, all Buddhist monarchs in the Theravada Buddhist world once made use of royal court Brahmans to perform rituals on their behalf, and the two Theravada monarchies that still exist, those of Thailand and Cambodia, continue to do so to this day.
What, if Anything, Is Theravada Buddhism?

The study of Buddhism in Southeast Asia has struggled to liberate itself from the persistent conflation of “Theravada Buddhism” with “early Buddhism.” Given that this conflation occludes practice, the very study of Theravada Buddhism or Southeast Asian Buddhism itself must inherently be a project focused on Buddhist practice. Luckily, an increased focus on Buddhist practice in general in recent decades has allowed for the growth of a true field of Theravada Buddhist studies, apart from early Buddhist studies. Unfortunately, until very recently, it was difficult to find a comprehensive study of Theravada or Southeast Asian Buddhism in English. Richard Gombrich’s Theravada Buddhism partially reinforced the old conflation by addressing only early Buddhism and modern Sri Lanka. Donald Swearer’s The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia eschewed the conflation of early and Theravada Buddhism, but lacked comprehensiveness insofar as it focused mostly on Buddhist practice in Thailand. It is only in the second decade of the twenty-first century that we have gotten a truly comprehensive account of Theravada Buddhism as such with Kate Crosby’s Theravada Buddhism.

Ironically, no sooner has the study of Theravada Buddhism come into its own than has its very basis been questioned. Several scholars, beginning with Peter Skilling, have pointed out that “Theravada” as a term of sectarian identity is rarely used by Buddhists in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. Todd Pereira has shown that the use of the term “Theravada” to refer to the type of non-Mahayana Buddhism practiced in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia can only be traced back to Ananda Metteyya, a Westerner ordained as a Burmese monk, in the early twentieth century. Although “Theravada” has become the standard sectarian label within the modern discourse of world religions, most Buddhist practitioners in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia would simply describe what they do as “Buddhism.” “Theravada Buddhism” is not only not the same thing as early Buddhism; it is, in a sense, a modern invention.

Buddhism in the Religious Landscape of Southeast Asia

As the study of Theravada Buddhism as a contemporary form of practice emerged in the twentieth century, early scholars grappled with what they saw as non-Buddhist
components in the religion of Sri Lankan and Southeast Asian Buddhists—in the form of the worship of and negotiation with gods and spirits. Michael Ames, studying Sri Lanka, referred to a non-Buddhist component that he called “magical-animism,” and Melford Spiro, studying Burma, referred to a non-Buddhist component that he called “supernaturalism” or “animism.”

Stanley Tambiah’s *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand* marked a turning point insofar as it saw the different aspects of Thai religion not as separate “components,” but as interrelated parts of a single religious “field.” Other studies of Thai religion by Kirsch and Terwiel published around the same time analyzed this “field” into two (Buddhism and animism) or three (Buddhism, Brahmanism, and animism) parts, with different origins, that contribute to the religious lives of Thai people.

Such studies relied on a model of “syncretism,” the theory that practical religion is the product of the “mixing” of different religious components. Syncretism has fallen into disfavor among scholars of religion in recent years, and in particular scholars of Buddhism, because it posits pure religious types prior to “mixing” that often have no referent in the real world. Scholars of Buddhism now understand that there was no “pure Buddhism,” even in its earliest centuries in India, free from the “contamination” of gods and spirits. The idea that Buddhism does not or should not involve gods and other supernatural beings is the modern product of an extremely selective reading of the Pali suttas through the lens of Protestant and Enlightenment rationalism. Recent studies, such as those by Hayashi, McDaniel, Holt, and Davis, have sought to resituate what were once considered non-Buddhist components in Theravada practice as instead normal and expected facets, often central to its practice.

**Vipassanā and a “Tantric” Theravada?**

As part of the conflation of Theravada Buddhism with early Buddhism and its fetishization as the most “primitive” and therefore “pure” form of Buddhism, there has been great interest in the modern West in the Theravada form of meditation known as *vipassanā* or “insight” meditation. The study of Theravada Buddhism on its own terms has led to the realization that meditation in general is far less central to its practice than the modernist image would have us believe, but it has also revealed a more complex set of traditions among those Theravada practitioners who do meditate. In the 1970s, on the verge of the takeover by the Khmer Rouge, François Bizot discovered an esoteric meditation tradition in Cambodia and salvaged some of their texts, which he then published over the following decades. Bizot noted certain similarities in this tradition with the Tantric traditions of Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism, including secret initiation, visualization techniques, and the use of sacred diagrams (*yantras*) and esoterically encoded *mantras*. The work of Bizot and a small group of followers
thus led to what was at first referred to as the study of “Tantric Theravada” or “esoteric Southern Buddhism.”

This terminology has fallen into disfavor, however, especially under the criticism of Justin McDaniel, who has argued that such practices are firmly rooted in the Pali tradition, with no relationship to the Mahayana or Hinduism, and actually form the mainstream of traditional Theravada practice.

While much of what had been dubbed “Tantric” in Theravada, such as the use of yantras and mantras, is indeed mainstream, Bizot’s discovery of an esoteric meditative tradition that is different from modern vipassanā and the para-canonical model provided by Buddhaghosa still stands. This tradition, which is now practiced only in a few places in Thailand and Cambodia, has been studied extensively by Kate Crosby. Crosby, preferring now to use the Thai term borān kammatthān (“old meditation”) to describe this tradition, rather than “Tantric,” estimates that it was once practiced widely in Sri Lanka and the Tai-Lao-Khmer region, prior to the modern period. It has now been replaced by various meditation methods that have their origins in the colonial period and typically place emphasis on their ties to canonical models, while appealing to a broad, including lay, audience. The most important and widespread of these is vipassanā, which originated in nineteenth-century Burma, in particular through the teachings of Ledi Sayadaw, and has since spread under various auspices across the traditional Theravada world and the world at large.

**Other Trends in the Study of Theravada Buddhist Practice**

Unfortunately, space limitations prevent me from going into much detail about other trends in the study of Theravada Buddhist practice. Southeast Asian and Sri Lankan Buddhisms have rich material cultures. Kevin Trainor’s work on the material culture of Sri Lankan Buddhism played an important role in the growth of interest in material culture in Buddhism. Unfortunately, much work remains to be done, although encouraging work has emerged recently on the culture of Buddha images and manuscripts. Theravada Buddhist studies has participated in the growth of interest in women in Buddhism and feminist studies of Buddhism. Within the context of Theravada Buddhism, this has often focused on recent efforts to restart the bhikkhuni-saṅgha. Finally, Theravada Buddhist studies has been on the forefront of efforts to recognize the role that violence plays in Buddhist traditions. While the essentialist understanding of Buddhism promoted the perception that Buddhism is a uniquely “peaceful” religion, cases of state-sponsored violence against religious minorities in Theravada Buddhist countries, particularly Muslims and Hindus, have led to studies of the ways in which Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia has been marshalled to the cause of violence.
The earlier conflation of Theravada Buddhism with a supposedly “pristine” early Buddhism was not simply academic; it actually gave rise to new forms of Buddhism that attempted to conform to the rationalist expectations that arose out of the Western academic construction of “original” Buddhism. This was particularly true in Sri Lanka under British colonial rule, where reformers sought to expunge Buddhism of any “non-rational” elements (mythology, belief in gods and spirits, etc.) and present it as a philosophy more “scientific” than any other religion, in particular Christianity, and therefore uniquely suited to the modern world. Gombrich and Obeyesekere dubbed this phenomenon “Protestant Buddhism,” where “Protestant” here has a double meaning. On the one hand, these reformers were “protesting” against the incursions of Christian missionaries in Sri Lanka. On the other hand, the reformed Buddhism they promoted in many ways imitated the structures and values of Protestant Christianity. More recent research has situated this particular movement in Sri Lanka within the context of a broader global growth of “rational” Buddhisms that suppress traditional supernatural aspects of the tradition, referred to as “Buddhist Modernism.”

Within the context of Theravada Buddhist practice, however, several scholars have questioned the degree to which modern Theravada Buddhist practice should be understood as a reaction to Western modernity. These authors, including Anne Blackburn, Michael Charney, Anne Hansen, Justin McDaniel, and Alicia Turner, have typically focused on particular Buddhist actors in Sri Lanka or Southeast Asia during the colonial period and the way in which they navigated the particular world that they inhabited. These scholars emphasize continuity with earlier Buddhist technologies, customs, thought-patterns, and mores that were employed by these actors within the context of colonialism, thus making them active participants in the construction of local modernities, rather than passive reactors to a hegemonic Western modernity.

Notes

4. There are also modern international converts to Theravada Buddhism, such as among the Newars of Nepal and Western Buddhists, but these are beyond the scope of this chapter.