
Review Essay: The Buddha's Wizards

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doi: 10.1558/bsor.38314

The Buddha's Wizards: Magic, Protection, and Healing in Burmese Buddhism by Thomas Nathan Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. US \$60 (hardcover). xxxiv + 187 pp. ISBN: 9780231187602.

The Buddha's Wizards offers a captivating historical overview of the phenomenon of Burmese "wizard saints," drawing from a wide array of archival, print media, and ethnographic materials, supplemented by the author's own extensive fieldwork undertaken since 2006. Thomas Patton introduces the world of the *weizzā*, a revered group of historical (and semi-historical) individuals attributed with magical abilities, famed for their divinatory, apotropaic and healing powers. A truncated form of Burmese *weizzā-dho* (derived from Pali *vijjādhara*, "a sorcerer"), the *weizzā* include Buddhist monks, eccentric hermits and ordinary lay people, a number of whom have attained something akin to divine status after their deaths. Patton charts the instrumental role of *weizzā* in narratives of resistance to British colonial occupation, going on to discuss the post-independence formation of *weizzā* societies and missions aimed at restoring and spreading the Buddhist religion (*sāsana*). The bulk of *The Buddha's Wizards* concentrates on Patton's own extensive study of the texts, devotional objects, and sociology associated with "*weizzā* cults," concluding with an account of the renewed popularity and public visibility of *weizzā* in the 21st century, enabled in large part by the suspension of official state censorship in 2013 and the rise of social media.

Owing to their liminal status with respect to Buddhist orthopraxy in Burma, the *weizzā* are understandably obscure in their origins, with public opinion toward them having been historically ambivalent. There are, to begin, the biographies of the wizard saints of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries themselves, rooted in historical personages, but disseminated and augmented by word of mouth over the intervening decades. Most notable among these are the legends associated with Bo Min Gaung (1885–1952), an eccentric hermit and resident of a small town near Pagan, said to have been able to predict Japanese air raids during World War II, to have been

invincible to the bullets and physical assaults of British colonial officers, and to have possessed various other powers of clairvoyance and teleportation. Visual representations of Bo Min Gaung are popular today—in the form of statues, paintings and enhanced photographs—appearing in home shrines and in public spaces, revered for their potential to channel the healing power of the departed *weizzā*. Patton emphasizes the amorphous depictions of Bo Min Gaung and other wizard saints, imagined sometimes as bodhisattva-like beings (associated with famed Buddhist characters of Burmese antiquity), sometimes as itinerant ghosts (for whom beds are laid out and food offerings prepared in home shrines), and sometimes revealing themselves in portentous dreams.

A principal means by which *weizzā* continue their presence in the world is through the living bodies of professional mediums, who "channel" or "are channeled" by the departed saints (the verb describing this activity in Burmese—"to *dhat-si*"—can be either active or passive). Of particular interest are young women who have acquired reputations as healers and counselors by "*dhat-si-ing*" *weizzā*, periodically transforming their voices, mannerisms and comportment as the saints speak and act through them before an invited audience. Patton highlights the potentially empowering nature of this practice for women, which endows them with the "symbolic resources and ritual strategies" to gain status in their families and communities.

The theoretical lynchpin of *The Buddha's Wizards* is the concept of *affect*, broadly construed, as utilized by a number of historians of religion, anthropologists, and political theorists invoked throughout the book. We are told that followers base their relationships "on feelings that arise when they interact with the *weizzā* image," and that the power of the *weizzā* "stems from the personalized affective tone that the devotee experiences when viewing, touching, and imagining the image [of a saint]" (59). Patton traverses the spectrum of meaning of the term "*affect*," in some cases intending it simply in the sense of one thing "having an effect" on another, sometimes in

the sense of “emotion,” but most often in the sense of internal states or processes, often with a somatic component, and corresponding to external stimuli, real or imagined.

A recurring motif in the accounts of *weizzā* devotees is the transformative event of a saint first appearing through a dream or apparition—experiences described as disorienting, and whose truth is understood in visceral terms. Patton explains that the bodies of *weizzā* devotees bear affect “as sort of ‘memory without content’” in the form of physical ailments (such as chronic headaches and digestive issues), translating specific psychological stresses in their daily lives into generalized somatic symptoms that *weizzā* have the ability to cure (89). Discussing the industry of producing customized images of *weizzā*, Patton argues that the wear and tear on devotional objects serves to further personalize accessories, transforming them into “bearers of affective memory” (62). Particular emphasis is given to the intersubjective nature of the affective relationships between the *weizzā* and those who revere them. Devotees often explain that their connections with departed *weizzā* are the result of “karmic bonds,” implying that contacts with a saint in the present are the result of interactions that occurred in former lives.

The Buddha’s Wizards advances an implicit critique of Melford Spiro’s famed taxonomy of Buddhist practice as falling into one of three categories: nibbānic (intended to bring about enlightenment), kammatic (intended to produce felicitous results in a future life), or apotropaic (concerning protection from calamity in the here and now). While clearly much of the appeal of the *weizzā* centers on their power to effect this-worldly benefits, the relationship that devotees have to the *weizzā* involves complex affective relationships (including longstanding ones involving *karma*), and implies advanced soteriological status for some channeling adepts (i.e., proximity to the goal of *nirvāṇa*). Interestingly the book concludes by introducing a complication to this very problematization: we learn that many Burmese do not consider *weizzā* devotion to be “true” or “authentic” Buddhism, with some of Patton’s informants even having exhorted him to write instead on what they considered to be more suitable and lofty subjects such as *abhidhamma* (abstruse Pali manuals on psychology and metaphysics) and *vipassanā* (insight meditation). Such apprehension toward the *weizzā* is accounted for in part by the historical association of wizard saints with heterodox and transgressive religious activity, and even with political subversion. Patton also draws attention to the development of western perceptions of Burmese Buddhism in the late nineteenth

and twentieth centuries, and the means by which such perceptions came to reinforce ideals of Buddhist orthodoxy and orthopraxy in Burma itself (a phenomenon similar to the “Protestant Buddhism” of Sri Lanka identified by Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere 1988). This revelation regarding contemporary Burmese popular perceptions of *weizzā* brings attention to a convergence of the “emic” and the “etic” with respect to certain attitudes concerning “exotic” as opposed to “rational” or “scientific” religion, reminding us that indefatigable scholarly attempts to subvert such categories may sometimes run up against a desire on the part of some Asian Buddhists to employ (or redeploy) those categories to represent their own normative visions of their own respective traditions.

Patton introduces a number of dimensions to the *weizzā* phenomenon amounting to tantalizing roads-not-quite-taken in his relatively short monograph (excluding the preface, notes and citations, *The Buddha’s Wizards* is 139 pages). Following the work of David Gordon White (1996), Patton observes close similarities between Indian “siddhas” and *weizzā* with respect to the “alchemical transformation” of the body and mind that each are believed to undergo through the course of obtaining their powers (15–16). Among the specialized practitioners known as “Mantra *weizzā*” and “Medicine (*hse*) *weizzā*,” Patton locates parallels with the Thai-Lao *wisa* of northeast Thailand and Thai *mo wiset*, themselves specialists in incantations designed to control supernatural spirits (14).¹ Nonetheless a substantive discussion of the relationship between Tantrism and *weizzā* literature and practice is not forthcoming. This is despite the intriguing mention of the fact that, according to tradition, *weizzā* obtain their powers of telepathy and telekinesis through years of study and practice in subjects including alchemy, meditation, recitation of sacred spells, magical diagrams, and “Vedic knowledge” (12–13).² One wonders about the potential for a deeper discussion of these aspects of *weizzā* culture to supplement Kate Crosby’s fascinating recent book on Tantra-like elements of Southeast Asian meditation practice (Crosby 2013), especially with reference to indigenous medicine and esoteric meditation.

In the final chapter of *The Buddha’s Wizards*, Patton attributes the recent resurgence in popularity and public visibility of *weizzā* worship partially to social media, though few specifics are given. Details would again be of keen interest to scholars of digital media/humanities and new religious movements in southern Asia and beyond. Philologically meticulous readers may quibble with a few translation choices, wondering for instance what is meant by a *nat* grasp-

ing control of a person's "soul" (Burmese: *leikpya*, 77), when we are made to understand that the denial of an enduring "self" or "soul" (Sanskrit: *ātman*; Pali: *atta*) is a cornerstone of Pali Buddhist thought.

In all *The Buddha's Wizards* represents a work of lucid scholarship on a novel topic of interest not only to students of Theravada Buddhism but also to ethnographers, theorists of affect, and historians of religion. Patton presents an eminently readable work with theoretical engagements germane to the times, made all the more enjoyable by his personal anecdotes and obvious investment in his subjects and subject matter.

Endnotes

¹ Patton references McDaniel (2011: 17, 37, 110) and Hayashi (2000).

² We are also told in passing of a corpus of unpublished Burmese Buddhist texts describing esoteric practices associated with the *weizzā*, such as the *Kappālanīkāra*, explaining "the meaning and varieties of a number of magical diagrams and spells used for a wide range of aims, such as achieving immortality, gaining supernatural powers, and averting danger" (4).

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Once More on Religion and Magic: Daniel Dubuisson's Religion and Magic in Western Culture

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doi: 10.1558/bsor.36439

Daniel Dubuisson, *Religion and Magic in Western Culture*. Leiden: Brill, 2016. viii + 201 pp. Cloth, ebook \$134, €101. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004317567>

In *Religion and Magic in Western Culture*, Daniel Dubuisson ventures into a debate as old as the social and human sciences. On the one hand, the analytic binary of religion and magic has been—more or less explicitly—a staple of academic theorizing for over a century, and scholars have persistently and variously attempted to define and defend both halves of this binary. On the other hand, religion and magic has also been criticized for almost as long (far longer, in fact, than more recent critiques of the category of religion) with critics pointing out that despite the

ongoing efforts of their colleagues to better articulate this binary, the pairing of religion and magic has never attained a useful level of descriptive or analytic utility and continues to carry pernicious evaluative connotations. Over the course of this century-plus debate, matters have proceeded in an almost dialectical manner: defenders offer some element, distinction, or function intended to better refine the interpretative capacities of religion and magic (usually in response to some critique), while critics reassert that each of these efforts, at best, lacks precision when put into practice, and, at worst, performs Western ethnocentrism, reinscribing, in some new register, the same old analytic, descriptive, and evaluative problems.

Dubuisson's book engages both aspects of this