
Book Reviews

Theravada Traditions: Buddhist Ritual Cultures in Contemporary Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, by John Clifford Holt. University of Hawai'i Press. 2017. 391pp. Hb. \$68, ISBN-13: 978-0-82486-780-5.

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In this excellent book, Holt seeks to re-balance the study of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, through focussing on ritual, and the ethics embodied in ritual cultures, rather than doctrines and texts. Ritual, he insists, is not simply 'an orchestrated symbolic action reaffirming social and cultural modalities of being' (p.x) but a dynamic, fluid, generative practice, which is far more representative of the religious pulse of a culture than abstract philosophy, however keen some Buddhists in Theravāda cultures may be on Abhidhamma!

Central to Holt's conceptual framework is that 'religious culture stands in reflexive relation to social, economic and political change' (p.6) and that ritual responds to this relationship. The book, therefore, is highly contextual, based on six years of field work and several decades of research experience in Sri Lanka and Lao religious cultures. It is structured around six case studies: venerating the Buddha image in Lao religious culture (Phra Bang); the Āsala Perahāra in Sri Lanka and the power of the Buddha's tooth-relic; temporary noviciate ordination in Thai Buddhist contexts; making merit in the Kāṭhina ceremony in Myanmar; the ritual caring for the dead in Cambodia (Pchum Ben).

I will focus on the second, third and fifth case study in this review. The case study of the Āsala Perahāra and the tooth relic is placed in the contemporary context of the ending of Sri Lanka's bitter and decades-long civil war in 2009, and the persistence of Buddhist militancy and nationalism. The origins of the *daḷadā* (tooth relic) are given, with particular stress on the extraordinary, transcendent powers attributed to it, and its traditional link with the prosperity and legitimacy of kingship. The role of the Perahāra is then described, again with a stress on the political, namely that it was a visual representation of a hierarchical social and political order, through which the gods were subordinated to the Buddha, and the outlying regions of the Kandyen Kingdom, to the centre. Whilst recognizing the devotion of many rural Buddhists to the *daḷadā* as a representation of the ongoing power and presence of the Buddha, Holt stresses the commodification and co-option of its meanings, in the context of a contemporary Sinhala Buddhist nationalism that seeks visual expression of 'Sinhala primordial claims to political ownership to the island' (p.129) and ongoing subordination of the non-Buddhist. Holt's view, therefore, is that the ceremony has been co-opted by forces that do not want to celebrate Sri Lanka's ethnic diversity.

Keywords: Theravāda Buddhism, ritual, ethics, merit-making

To turn to Holt's third case study, 80% of Thai males undergo temporary novice ordination (*pabbajjā*) at some point in their lives. Holt sets this in the context of changing social and religious aspirations within an uncertain political and business-orientated environment. The picture he paints of *pabbajjā* (going forth) is far from uniform, highlighting difference between urban and rural, traditionalist and modernist. He notes a shifting of focus from the person undergoing *pabbajjā* to the family sponsoring the renunciation, namely those with whom the merit of the action is shared, particularly the mother. *Pabbajjā*, in these contexts, which can last for as little as three days, becomes essentially a merit-making act, driven by women and involving considerable financial outlay. In rural areas, it is accompanied by processions, the invoking of guardian deities and the killing of buffaloes to feed the throng who attend. In Wat Phra Dhammakaya, in Bangkok, however, the approach described by Holt is more modernist. Food is provided free by the temple, the novice experience is seven weeks, popular rural culture is eliminated and those renouncing are expected to meditate. There is a greater emphasis on the novice leading to higher ordination. The result is that one in ten of those who receive a novice ordination stay at the wat after their seven weeks. Towards the end of the chapter, the ordination of women is mentioned, for instance the pioneering work of Ven. Dhammananda (Chatsumarn Kabilsingh), and the ordination of trees to prevent environmental degradation.

Holt places his last case study, that of *Bchum Ben* in Cambodia, in the context of the violence experienced by the country in the 1970s and 1980s, when the foundations of Cambodian Buddhist society, the Buddhist temple and the family, were radically fractured. *Bchum Ben* is a 15 day ceremony in September or October, towards the end of the rains retreat, when there is a transference of merit to the dead in elaborate ceremonies that involve giving sticky rice to the dead, providing feasts for the monastic Sangha and the chanting of texts. Holt demonstrates the importance of this ceremony in a context where most of the living have lost family members to 'unnatural deaths'. It has become, according to Holt, a means through which villages express grief and come to terms with the tragedy of the past but also regain cohesion and health. Again he points to modernist/traditionalist tensions, with some monks re-casting the ceremony as cultural rather than religious. Holt's position, however, is that its ethical import, encouraging generosity and a rejoicing in moral goodness, places it firmly within Buddhism.

In all these case studies, Holt includes historical and textual data. Much of the Sri Lankan case study is given over to historical context within which texts such as the Pali and Sinhala *Dāṭhavaṃsa*, the *Cūḷavaṃsa*, the Sinhala *Bodhivaṃsa* and the *Daḷadā Sirita* (a text that outlines ritual veneration of the tooth relic, part of which is translated in an appendix), are mentioned. The chapter on *pabbajjā* in Thailand contains data from the *Mahāvagga* and ethnographic background on Thai Buddhist monastic ordinations. The Cambodian case study cites the *Petavatthu*, the *Tirokuḍḍa Sutta* (*Khuddaka-pāṭha* 7) and the *Parābhava Sutta* (*Sn.1.6*), as texts drawn on by participants in *pchum ben*, and gives a historical overview of the country's 'unnatural deaths'. And the same is true of the two case studies I have omitted in this review. The first

case study from Laos, for instance, offers a detailed analysis of the cosmology surrounding the space of a rural village and the impact on this of political change.

The book is illustrated with photos taken by Holt in his fieldwork. It is beautifully produced and offers an innovative approach to the study of Theravāda Buddhism, one that is not afraid to assert the inter-dependence of the religious and the political, and the centrality of ritual in the Buddhist imaginary. I highly recommend it.