

*Sacred Sites of Burma: Myth and Folklore in an Evolving Spiritual Realm* by Donald Stadtner. River Books. 348pp., hb. 482 colour illustrations, 12 maps and plans. US\$35/£19.95. ISBN 13: 9789749863602.

Reviewed by Sarah Shaw, Oriental Institute, Oxford University and Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies, sarah99@onetel.com

### Keywords

Buddhist art, Buddhist architecture, Burma, popular culture

Thirty years ago Donald Swearer commented, ‘in most courses on Buddhism insufficient attention is given to art’.<sup>1</sup> It does not look as if this is likely to change: not everyone interested in Buddhism is attracted to visual expression. Despite this, his point is worth remembering if one wishes to understand the use of texts and how they have been interpreted in practice, ritual and temple settings. And fortunately, for those who do see the importance of examining material culture, both for its own sake and as a way to understand ritual and practice, a growing number of works are being published on this and related subjects in Thailand, by River Books and Silkworm. These publishing houses are becoming deeply influential in Southern Buddhist studies, simply by presenting various aspects of art and architecture in well-written and authoritative guides, dense with good illustrations and photographs. These studies examine the history of the use of traditional texts and the evolution of narrative forms and mythologies in relation to temple architecture, murals, sculpture and folk art within particular regions in Southeast Asia. Such encompassing work is helping to build up a larger picture of how Buddhism has developed in practice and ritual at different times and in different locations.

This book offers a vivid and well-substantiated example of this type of work. The title suggests a study of changing conditions in the imaginative and spiritual understanding of Buddhists within Burma, with regard to specific sites. It certainly manages a sense of the evolutionary, drawing on the ever-developing narratives and myths that have shaped the sense of the sacred in various Buddhist locations, from the earliest evidence in the Mon sculptures and *sīmā* stones around Hpa An, Thaton and Pegu up to twenty-first century art, popular culture and architecture. It also, however, provides an extensive historical background study of the factors contributing to the emergence of specific sites at different times, and their continued life as sacred places, thus providing us with a picture not only of highly localized adaptations, but also of the complexity of varied influences and historical trends that contribute to the wish to honour and depict certain legends and narratives in any particular place.

After an atmospheric preface, describing the dramatic crisis in a friend’s life that led to a trip to the Shwedagon in Yangon, and his own new understanding of the central role of ritual and blessings in Burmese life, the author begins his explanatory first chapter with an anecdote. This occurs in his account of one new sacred site coming into existence in 2005. A farmer, finding some Buddha images

1. *Buddhism and Society in Southeast Asia*. 1981. Chambersberg, Pa: Anima Books, p. 76.

while digging the ground near Yangon, initiates a bout of new discoveries in surrounding villages that lead to the area's new status as a 'sacred' space and a developing mythology of how they were found and how they got there. This awareness of modernity interacting with and constantly creating and recreating past heritage continues throughout the work. The author throughout cites posters, modern art works and photographs as well as ancient monumental, sculptural and artistic evidence, managing to weave them together with citations of textual vernacular chronicles and Pali stories, in order to communicate a convincing history of each site, from the point of view of both archaeological fact and local legend. In fact, his book is a kind of ongoing site-history of how each location came to be sacred, and how background factors continue to contribute to this.

After an introduction on method, the book is then divided according to geographical regions, corresponding in part to chronological importance. This is a sensible arrangement, as it takes each site through to the twenty-first century, but also accommodates an overall historical perspective. This part of the book starts with the one-time capital Yangon, not the earliest Buddhist location but having the most significant modern sites, the Shwedagon pagoda and the Sule pagoda, both of which have probably experienced a thousand years as destinations and focus of activity sacred to Buddhists. Examining historical evidence for the emergence of various myths associated with these, this section then explores monumental inscriptions, chronicles and popular histories to build up a chronological picture of how the Burmese have historically viewed their sacredness, and how this is demonstrated in additions, restorations and new art work. The temples of other religions are also included in this analysis.

The book then moves from Yangon to the Mon country, where Buddhism is traditionally held to have arrived first, and the sites of Pegu, Kyaik-hti-yo, Thaton and Moulmein. The excellent detail in the section on Thaton is particularly welcome: this ancient town, once thought to be the 'Suvanṇabhūmi' of the ancient texts, is where the Buddha is traditionally believed to have brought Buddhism to Burma initially. Some parts of its temples are deeply atmospheric, and layered with centuries of accretions of artifacts, myths and history. The town is, incidentally, now completely ignored by guide books, despite the fact that, as Stadtner notes, it 'touches heartstrings' (168) in both the Mon and the Burmese community. After this section, each region is examined for historical importance and for evolving Buddhist narratives: the book covers Upper Burma (Magwe), where there is a Buddha footprint and legend; Prome, Burma's first kingdom; Pagan and all its glorious temples; later Burmese kingdoms, such as at Amarapura and Mandalay; Inle Lake and finally Rakhine State. Each site and its place in a larger geographical and historical context have been examined with painstaking care. All discussion is accompanied by extensive illustrations and a vast number of unusually well-defined photographs, mostly taken by the author.

Obviously in a book of this scope it is possible to find some faults. Despite the word 'spiritual' in the title we get little coverage of the meditative practices of the Burmese in the temples, in a country where both *samatha* and *vipassanā* methods are highly developed, and where lay practice is so prominent. The unusual status accorded to ten-precept nuns in Burma is discussed only in passing, though it would be interesting to integrate this group — so numerous in Burma — into the narrative, even if their large numbers are only a modern develop-

ment. Features of such practice does have some impact upon material culture: the book makes no mention of the seventh book of the *Abhidhamma*, the *Paṭṭhāna*, whose chanted form is so peculiarly popular in Burma and whose twenty-four conditions are found depicted on the petalled flower wheels that feature everywhere. They can be found in contexts as varied as wrought-iron door and window guards in temples, temple decoration, monastic fans, banners, and commercially mass-produced car stickers on the front windows of taxis, tuk-tuks and private cars. So while modern ritual, human interaction with myths and legends and the many festivals and customs are described with a highly eloquent and sympathetic sense of colour, differentiation and nuance, we do not get so much on the specific place of, for instance, meditation or specific chants and practices within daily practice, and the extent to which the spiritual, in the meditative as well as the ritual sense, contributes to the interior emotional life and practice of monks, nuns, lay men and lay women.

These are quibbles, however, as for anyone who wants to find out about regional Burmese Buddhism, or who is actually in a position to visit the sites described, this book is invaluable. Not only does it collect together a large amount of scholarly information that would be difficult to access otherwise, and provide new insights and interpretations of this material, it works also as an easily portable Baedeker for the sites explained. Anyone seriously interested in Buddhism who has travelled to South and Southeast Asia knows what it is like to want to look something up quickly in a large book that could be consulted quickly in libraries at home, but which of course cannot be to hand. While e-book readers such as Kindle and the excellent new online digitalization projects conducted by many universities are now a big help in this regard, there is still nothing like being able to browse through a well produced and densely illustrated book that explains many of the sculptures, art, history and context of the important sites that a visitor is likely to encounter — and is not itself too heavy to carry while looking around them. In a Burmese context, where internet access is intermittent and there are no Western mobile phone networks operating, so no quick Google searches possible, this book is particularly helpful in serving simply as the best available guide around.

But it is of course from the point of view of the range of sites discussed that the usefulness of the work emerges: there is no contemporary study that matches its comprehensiveness and detail. Nor has its underlying argument been presented previously — that Buddhist sites have an ever evolving mythology and way of practice — and in the book the author makes a convincing case for this. Many temples in Burma are highly idiosyncratic, giving prominence to particular local stories or myths in temple art and, for example, according a single *Jātaka* that may be lesser known, a particular emphasis and artist treatment presumably requested by patrons, those commissioning the artwork, or the local monastic and lay community. Stadtner steers the reader through the evolution of these individual sites, explaining pictorial and sculptural content. The major exceptions to this sense of very distinct individual identities within sites are, of course, the great complexes at Mandalay and Pagan, where there are numerous temples, pagodas and palaces, all contributing in various ways to the collective narrative culture. The magnificence of these temples, and other monuments, is also well

summarized, as are the more recent myths that have contributed to the Burmese understanding of the imaginative world of these sites.

This book guides the reader through complexes of temples and monuments, as well as through often bewilderingly intricate legends, local history and background. It weaves in many new elements to the discussion, such as tales and accounts from popular pamphlets, novels and poems up to recent times. In this regard alone it represents a real contribution to scholarship on Burmese culture. That it also presents so much traditional academic study, and includes a really impressive bibliography on Burmese history, art and archaeology, makes it a significant contribution to our understanding of Burmese Buddhism in practice.