

Review

Peter Skilling, Jason A. Carbine, Claudio Cicuzza and Santi Pakdeekham (eds.), *How Theravāda is Theravāda? Exploring Buddhist Identities*. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2012. xxxvi + 620 pp. £40.00/\$60.00. ISBN 978-6-16215-044-9 (paperback).

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It has long been recognized that there is no evidence in premodernity that the term ‘Theravāda’ as a religious system, to quote Peter Skilling, ‘was central, or even relevant, to the self-understanding of those who participated in the Buddhaśāsanā’ (p. xxi). This is the first work to seriously address this problem and, as its title suggests, this extremely valuable collection of articles investigates the utility of this label—among other markers of identity—and also the underlying historical and social realities it seeks to describe. In his introduction Peter Skilling emphasizes the variegated nature of these realities by bringing into sharp relief the nebulous, interweaving, decentralized nature of the monastic traditions of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, the laity that supports them, and the cultures they engender. By emphasizing the complexity of the object of study from the outset, Skilling provides a space in which the contributors can engage in an open discussion on the many identities subsumed under the term ‘Theravāda’.

The essays are arranged in a loose chronology according to the historical period they deal with. The first three contributions by Rupert Gethin (‘Was Buddhaghosa a Theravādin? Buddhist Identity in the Pali Commentaries and Chronicles’), L. S. Cousins (‘The Teachings of the Abhayagiri School’), and Max Deeg (‘Sthavira, Thera, and “*Sthaviravāda” in Chinese Buddhist Sources’) focus on the identity of the monastic communities in early medieval Sri Lanka and could easily be published together as a book in their own right such is their quality.

Using both commentarial and inscriptional evidence, Gethin masterfully shows that the self-identification of the Lankan Buddhist tradition can be divided into four phases. The first is their identification as *theriya*, part of a lineage of elders descending from the first and second councils. Secondly, this identification as *theriya* comes to signify a sect from whom the Mahāsaṅghikas and others split at the second council. Thirdly, the monks affiliated with the Mahāvihāra *nikāya* (in opposition to the Abhayagiri or Jetavana *nikāyas*)

viewed themselves as the sole inheritors of this *theriya* lineage. Lastly, Indian Buddhists also came to view the Theras of Laṅkā as the only remaining representatives of this lineage. Gethin concludes that Buddhaghosa would have identified with this *theriya* lineage but would not have used the modern sectarian term ‘Theravāda’.

Cousins’ contribution provides much needed information on the transition between phases two and three in Gethin’s scheme. Cousins investigates the chronology and nature of the separation of the Mahāvihāra and Abhayagiri *nikāyas*. He shows that there was a gradual separation of the Lankan *theriya* tradition from the mainland around the beginning of the common-era and that the Mahāvihāra seems to have formally separated from the Abhayagiri *nikāya* sometime after the third century CE. By analysing the surviving evidence, Cousins examines some of the doctrinal differences between the Abhayagiri and Mahāvihāra and shows that they seem to have shared the same Pali canon and that their differences often stem from fine points of exegesis. However, it is unclear how far the Abhayagiri monks were also identified with the *theriya* lineage.

Deeg’s article on Chinese descriptions of Lankan sectarianism provides a particularly fascinating intervention in this regard that also supplements the fourth phase in Gethin’s scheme. Deeg shows that the Chinese sources also reflect similar accounts of the history of Buddhist sectarianism in India and Sri Lanka. Yijing (635–713), for instance, describes Sri Lanka as following the *theriya* tradition (Shangzuo, lit. the High-seated) and rejecting the Mahāsaṅghika (Dazhong) (p. 144). Of particular interest is an account in the travelogue of Xuanzang, the *Xiyu-ji*, in which Sri Lanka is said to belong to the Mahāyānasthavira-nikāya, a seemingly hybrid term combining both the Mahāyāna and Sthavira *nikāyas*. Xuanzang goes on to explain that in Sri Lanka the Mahāvihāravāsins reject the Mahāyāna whereas the Abhayagirivihāravāsins study both vehicles (p. 152). Deeg speculates that the hybrid designation Mahāyānasthavira-nikāya perhaps arose out of a desire to establish the Mahāyāna credentials of the Lankan sangha in China by highlighting the eclectic practices of the Abhayagirivihāra at the time.

The only criticism I can offer of the opening section of this collection—more of an observation really as the editors cannot be held to account for it—is that the volume moves briskly into eleventh-century Burma (the only contribution from this period) and does not return again to Lankan Buddhism until Anne M. Blackburn’s article on eighteenth and nineteenth-century monastic identities. Without sustained attention to the post-Buddhaghosan sangha and the influential reforms of the Lankan monarch Parākramabāhu I (1156 CE), the book’s treatment of the Buddhist identities of the premodern sangha loses any potential claim to comprehensiveness. Another chronological gap, though this time acknowledged by Skilling, is the lack of a study of contemporary Theravāda practice (p. xxii, n. 19).

Lilian Handlin's article 'The King and his Bhagavā: The Meanings of Pagan's Early Theravāda' marks a wonderful shift from the text-centred approaches of the previous contributions. Using art and architectural sources alongside inscriptions, Handlin focuses on the representation of Buddhism during the reign of King Kyanziththa (r. 1084–1113). She shows how Kyanziththa's presentation of Buddhism was incredibly eclectic, mingling Pali and non-Pali sources in an ideational patchwork. In doing so, Handlin emphasizes that the local reality of articulating Buddhist identity was far more complex and nuanced than is reflected in the work of scholar monks. Handlin's article is complemented by Jason A. Carbine's 'Sāsanasuddhi / Sīmāsammuti: Comments on a Spatial Basis of the Buddha's Religion' in which he sheds further light on the fifteenth-century Kalyāṇī inscriptions and the role of ritual (rather than doctrine or hermeneutics) and the consecration of ritual space in the transmission of Buddhist lineages. Neither contribution finds 'Theravāda' as a marker of identity but Carbine offers the interesting suggestion of using the oft-evoked term 'sāsana' as a broader, more wholistic, supplementary signifier for the cultural diversity and geographical complexity of the Buddhist traditions of Southeast Asia.

The largest section of this volume deals with Buddhist identity in modernity and begins with Anne M. Blackburn's insightful article, 'Lineage, Inheritance, and Belonging: Expressions of Monastic Affiliation from Laṅkā', in which she draws on her previous work on eighteenth and nineteenth-century Sri Lankan Buddhism. She focuses in particular on the Siyam Nikāya and the correspondence of the leading scholar monk Hikkaḍuvē Sumaṅgala and shows that expressions of religious identity changed depending on the circumstances. For instance, at times monastic lineages are identified with the *theravaṃsa*, with Aśoka's third council, with the *saṅgha* produced by the reforms of Parākramabāhu I, or with the Siyam Nikāya's links to Thailand. By revealing in such a clear manner the multiple identities of the Siyam Nikāya in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Sri Lanka, Blackburn's article, perhaps better than any other, conveys the slippery nature of monastic identity.

In his own excellent contribution, 'King Rāma I and Wat Phra Chetuphon: The Buddha-śāsana in early Bangkok', Peter Skilling investigates the court Buddhism of the Ratnakosin (or Bangkok) period in Thailand. In particular he focuses on Rāma I's 'restoration' of Buddhism and skilfully describes the developments in art and architecture during his reign, relating them to the shifting identities of Bangkok Buddhism. One of the most fascinating aspects of Skilling's article is his challenge to Steven Collins' formulation of the 'Pali imaginaire'. Skilling compares the Thai idea of Phra Pāḷī, 'a cumulative ritual, ethical, scriptural, and hermeneutical heritage, transmitted in the "language of Magadha"—including the "Pali Canon" with its commentaries and ancillary texts and more' (p. 336), with Collins' imaginaire and finds the latter too static and stable compared with the instability of the imaginaire in practice. While Skilling's criticisms are well-founded, especially with the support of

the contributions of this volume, I would have been very interested in a more extensive challenge to Collins' central thesis, namely that Pali literature was primarily an ideology that 'had to do with naturalizing inequality in social hierarchies (through karma and the idea of merit), and with the pacification of populations, helping to make it possible for tribute-takers in the premodern agrarian states where the Teaching (*sāsana*) was established to extract a surplus from tribute-givers' (Collins 2003: 81, cf. also Collins 1998). It is in this Marxian ideological sense that Collins adopts the term 'imaginaire' and I was left hoping that Skilling would address this important aspect of Collins' use of the term.

The subsequent short articles by Claudio Cicutza ('The Benefits of Ordination according to the *Paramatthamaṅgala*') and Olivier de Bernon ('Circulation of Texts in Mid-Nineteenth Century Cambodia: A new reading of Inscription K. 892 (Vatt Tā Tok, CE 1857)') both provide small-scale analyses that highlight the diversity of local Buddhist literary cultures. In presenting the first chapter of the *Paramatthamaṅgala*, one of the first major studies of a Thai *ānisaṃsa* text, Cicutza provides a tantalizing taste of the vast archive of *ānisaṃsa* literature that has yet to receive much critical attention. A more extensive preface to this edition and translation along with a more detailed explanation of how this text 'does not fit many of the current paradigms of Theravāda Buddhism' (p. 357) would have helped orientate the lay reader in approaching this fascinating text. De Bernon provides a new reading of a Khmer inscription that details the donation of texts to a rural monastery in Siem Reap in 1857. Excluding a collection of Pali texts recited in rituals (*vān dhamma*), nearly all the works are in Khmer and the list provides a unique snapshot of a nineteenth-century literary culture in rural Cambodia.

The final articles in the volume emphasize the transregional, multicentred construction of modern Buddhist identities. The venerable Phra Anil Sakya ('King Mongkut's Invention of a Universal Pali Script') explores the invention of a universal Pali script, the Ariyaka script, by king Mongkut (1804–1868). This description of King Mongkut's desire to provide the foundation for greater communication and unity among the Pali-using Buddhists of Southeast Asia provides a useful counterpart to Blackburn's account of the Lankan appeals to Thai royalty for patronage. The account also offers a fascinating parallel to the early endeavours by Europeans to 'standardize'/'universalize' Pali textual practice during the same period. This mixture of various Asian and European actors in the formation of Buddhist identity in the nineteenth century is reflected in Arthid Sheravanichkul's article 'Thai Ideas about Hīnayāna-Mahāyāna: Correspondence between King Chulalongkorn and Prince Narisranuvattiwong'. Sheravanichkul explores the source material that influenced discussions between King Chulalongkorn and Prince Narisranuvattiwong on the differences between the 'Hīnayāna' and the 'Mahāyāna'. Sheravanichkul reveals that their discussion was largely influenced by Western sources, Thai chronicles, and English translations of Japanese accounts of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

The central role of the Japanese sangha in the construction of the modern Theravāda identity is again raised in Todd LeRoy Perreira's analysis of the formation of the term 'Theravāda' in Western sources ('Whence Theravāda? The Modern Genealogy of an Ancient Term'). This brilliant contribution, more of a monograph in actuality, is a superbly researched tour de force of the wide variety of influences that brought about the creation of the designation 'Theravāda'. In brief, Perreira shows that the genesis of this term began with Eugène Burnouf's division of Buddhism into Northern and Southern schools. Due to the successful propaganda missions of Meiji Japanese monks, in particular during the Chicago World's Parliament of Religions in 1893, this bipartite division began to be replaced by the designations Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna. Perreira demonstrates that it was in reaction to the negative connotations of the term Hīnayāna that the British convert and monk Ananda Metteya first coined the term 'Theravāda' and that soon after it entered academic discourse.

This large volume is a landmark in Buddhist studies and all the excellent contributions are united in presenting Buddhist identities in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia in all their complexity. Identity has been shown to be fairly fluid, with a number of identity markers circulating depending on the context and audience. Skilling, however, wisely advises the reader not to run roughshod over convention by getting rid of the term Theravāda altogether, especially as it is now more significant than ever, but advocates a more detached, critical use of the term. This work will certainly inspire further research on this important issue and will remain a must read for any graduate student entering the study of Theravāda Buddhism for years to come. I wholeheartedly agree with the editors' own appraisal of their work as a triple 'eee-book', 'eccentric, extravagant, and excellent' (p. xxxiv).

REFERENCES

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