Review

Buddhism, Education and Politics in Burma and Thailand: From the Seventeenth Century to the Present, by Khammai Dhammasami. London: Bloomsbury, 2018. 272 pp., £85 (hb), £28.99 (pb). ISBN 978-1-3500-5424-0 (hb), 978-1-3501-2306-9 (pb).

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Keywords: Thailand; Burma; Buddhism; Theravāda; Pali; education.

This book by Khammai Dhammasami is a welcome contribution to Theravāda studies and in particular opens new ground on a little-studied aspect of Theravāda Buddhism—monastic education. It gives a comprehensive history of the development of standardized systems of exams for monks in Burma and Siam. The book is divided into six chapters, of which the first and last are an introduction and conclusion. The remaining four chapters are divided equally between Burma and Siam. In both cases, Dhammasami devotes the second chapter to the relevant late-nineteenth-century modernist reformer (King Mindon of Burma in chapter 3 and King Chulalongkorn of Siam in chapter 5), with earlier historical developments for each country covered in the first chapter (chapters 2 and 4, respectively). The book is also equipped with four useful appendices that outline the syllabi of the various monastic exams studied in the text proper.

The most important thing that readers of this book, many of whom will come from the field of Religious Studies, should be warned of is that Dhammasami has an explicit normative agenda. This is not a criticism *per se*, but it may come across as a bit jarring to Religious Studies scholars who are accustomed to practicing the *epoche*. Ven. Dhammasami is himself a Theravāda Buddhist monk, so it comes as no surprise that he has a personal investment in the systems of monastic education in his native country of Myanmar and neighbouring Thailand, where he has also studied. He argues that the modern system of exams in both countries has contributed to the decline of the *saṅgha* by fostering an excessive focus on passing exams and winning titles, to the neglect of expertise in Pali, knowledge of the canonical scriptures, and ability to relate Buddhist teachings to contemporary social problems. The examination syllabi draw almost exclusively on commentarial

literature and are taught at such an accelerated pace that they encourage rote memorization and leave monks with little practical knowledge of Buddhist teachings or Pali.

Dhammasami's argument about the poor state of monastic education in Myanmar and Thailand is by no means unconvincing, and I do not begrudge him making such a normative argument in spite of the fact that it goes somewhat against the standard of my own field. Nevertheless, I do find his thesis, in a particular sense, to be a bit weak, and for that reason frustrating. It feels as though Dhammasami can't decide whether to write a standard academic history or to write a perhaps sorely needed polemical text against the sorry state of monastic education in the Theravāda world. On the one hand, a significant portion of the book reads like a dispassionate academic history of the development of monastic education in the two countries. On the other hand, Dhammasami makes it very clear that he considers the outcome of this history to be terrible. But he doesn't really give any detailed plan for how the system of monastic education could be improved. He notes that the culture of education in the *saṅgha* does not encourage monks to speak up or question anything, much less the system as a whole. So perhaps even raising the possibility that the system is broken, as he does in this book, is an act of audacity on Dhammasami's part, and going any further would seem hopelessly arrogant.

Nevertheless, by not offering a solution, Dhammasami opens himself up to the criticism that he is being excessively idealistic and idly criticizing without any practical solutions. I finished the book feeling frustrated, like Khammai Dhammasami, with the state of Theravāda Buddhist monastic education, but without any clear sense of how it can be improved. Is it simply a matter of slowing down the pace of the syllabi and replacing commentarial literature with canonical texts? Does there need to be a cultural change to encourage critical thinking about the *dhamma* instead of rote memorization? Or should standardized exams be done away with altogether? Dhammasami speaks with some nostalgia about the traditional form of education in Burma and Siam, prior to the introduction of formalized exams, but is it possible or desirable to return to the traditional form of training?

Another somewhat related criticism of the book is that it is at times disorganized. In part, this follows from the lack of a strong thesis. If Dhammasami had gone all in with a normative argument about the abysmal state of monastic education in Thailand and Burma, then it probably would have been a far different book, less concerned with the minutiae of history and more with making the case for what is wrong, how it came about, and how to fix it. As it stands, the normative thesis mostly serves to take the place of a historical argument that would otherwise have served as the focal point around which to organize the historical data that Dhammasami analyses. Chapter 4, about the early history of monastic education in Siam, in particular seems to go on a tangent away from the primary theme of the book. This is in part

understandable given that the historical record for Siam prior to the Burmese sack of Ayutthaya is quite spotty, but Dhammasami seems to make up for a lack of sources about monastic education specifically by talking about whatever is known about the *saṅgha* in pre-Rattanakosin Siam, however ancillary related. There are other places where Dhammasami more inexplicably goes off on tangents, such as pp. 28–32, in which he gives a diatribe against modern monastic education in Burma in the context of a chapter ostensibly about Kings Thalun (1629–1648) and Bodawpaya (1782–1819).

These criticisms notwithstanding, I want to emphasize that this monograph represents an extremely valuable contribution to the study of Theravāda Buddhism and Buddhist monastic education. While monastic education has been well studied in Tibetan Buddhism, it has been little studied in Theravāda Buddhism, potentially giving the false impression that Theravāda monks are focused on orthopraxic Vinaya observance to the utter exclusion of study of the *dharmma*. Dhammasami's book, with its wealth of information about monastic reforms and examination programs, will serve as a key starting point for a generation of scholars researching various aspects of Theravāda Buddhism, as well as those engaging in comparative projects on Buddhist monastic education or monastic education in general. In addition, even though it does not offer a comprehensive plan of action, it may very well help to spark the next generation of reforms in monastic education in Myanmar and Thailand themselves.