

and implementing a new fashion identity for Thai women that also encouraged and supported rural development. Through an informative text and hundreds of beautiful illustrations this achievement has been carefully recorded for posterity in *In Royal Fashion: The Style of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit of Thailand*.

Jane Puranananda

*How Theravāda is Theravāda? Exploring Buddhist Identities* edited by Peter Skilling, Jason A. Carbine, Claudio Cicuzza, and Santi Pakdeekham (Bangkok: Silksworm Books, 2012). ISBN 978-616-215-044-9.



*How Theravāda is Theravāda?* is a set of essays that question one of the most important ideas we have about Buddhism in the region: the concept of Theravāda, usually understood as a coherent “school” of Buddhism based upon a community that is aware of themselves in contradistinction to the Mahāyāna Buddhism of Tibet and much of East Asia. It turns out, however, that the term “Theravāda”, in the sense of denoting a set of practices and a community, surfaced only in the 19th century through the writings of foreign scholars. Local scholars and monks took up the term with alacrity, culminating in its use at the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Sri Lanka in the early 1950s. What is also remarkable is the extent to which the concept of “Theravāda Buddhism” has become central both to scholarship and the

so-called Theravadin societies of Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia themselves. National histories from the region often project a sense of always having been a Theravāda nation.

Taken as a whole, this volume asks in effect, what do we do with the term “Theravāda”? Despite the fact that it is a recent intellectual construct, what are the historical forerunners of it, and what did earlier terms denote? Even if there were no terms that meant exactly what Theravāda does today, can we find evidence of a shared sense of identity, community, practice, or thought world? How did practitioners in the region understand themselves, and what were their connections between each

other? The contributors, ranging from the fields of religious studies and art history, with some leanings towards philology, ponder these questions. Readers who are not specialists in those fields may find some chapters more accessible than others.

Where does the term “Theravāda” then come from, and what did it, or its predecessors, mean in the past? In the Introduction, Peter Skilling observes that the Pāli chronicles speak of the transmission of the *theravaṃsa* or “lineage of the elders through *simas* (spaces where ordinations into the monkhood take place) at Anurādhapura in what is now Sri Lanka. Through this lineage have circulated the teachings of Buddhism throughout Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, together with bodhi trees, relics, and more recently, images. On more than one occasion, the actual lineages themselves have been “planted” and replanted in various places where an ordination lineage was either broken through attrition among the monks, or through perceptions of degeneracy. Aside from this one predecessor of the concept, when we do find the term *theravāda* in pre-modern records, it refers simply to the idea of “what the elders said.” With this emphasis on precedence, the term does not imply a set of practices, much less an entire school of religion. An early mention in a Burmese text is in reference to monks not wearing their robes correctly.

The idea of lineages, practices, and a sense of community between the Theravadin civilizations is a theme several contributors take up. In Chapter 1, Rupert Gethin focuses on the figure of Buddhaghosa, who wrote many of the defining texts of what has become Theravāda Buddhism. In looking into some of those texts—Lankan works composed up to the 12th century—for signs of religious identity, Gethin finds lineages of the *theras* or elders, a set of missions between the Theravadin countries, the *vibhajjavādin* analytical tradition, and a connection to the Mahāvihāra “Great Temple” in Anurādhapura. Together, these references build a sense of a shared religious community of the time.

Jason Carbine, in his chapter, looks at a specific instance of the formation and continuation of a community. Through an examination of the Kalyāṇī Inscriptions of late 15th century Thaton, a Mon polity in what is today Lower Burma, Carbine finds connections between *simas*, practices, lineages, and the creation of a sense of community. The Inscriptions are the earliest roots of a lineage and practice, based on a site and on the Inscriptions themselves, through which a monastic community has maintained and reproduced itself. While the Kalyāṇī Inscriptions have become a text central to how Burmese and Mons understand their religious identities today, I would also note the hand of British colonial scholarship in positioning the Inscriptions in Burmese historiography. Similarly, Anne Blackburn finds evidence of a shared sense of community and lineage in three monastic histories of Lanka.

Peter Skilling introduces a useful concept, that of the Pāli *imaginaire*, to describe the possibility of a community having a shared “thought world,” or set of ideas, practices, lineages, and places. From a modern perspective, Wat Phra Chetuphon, a late 18th-century Thai temple built in the early Bangkok period, is thoroughly

“Theravadin” in its architecture, art, and inscriptions, without seemingly being self-consciously so. The interaction between Pāli-language and vernacular traditions in cosmopolitan early Bangkok resulted in the temple, a visual and intellectual instantiation of an unnamed thought world that we would identify as Theravadin.

Turning to the contemporary notion of Theravāda, we learn that it has evolved out of a century and a half of western and Japanese engagement, largely textual, with South and Southeast Asia. In his contribution—what is in effect a monograph—Todd LeRoy Perreira traces the genealogy of the term Theravāda back from the pivotal moment on 25 May 1950, when during the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Kandy, the Venerable Mahā Nāyaka Thera of Malwatta was the first of many participants at the conference to speak of Theravāda Buddhism and its pristine state of purity in Sri Lanka at the time. This event, with its use of the term “Theravāda Buddhism” and connotations of purity, was the culmination of several developments coming together. Foreign scholars had studied the religious practices of colonial India and Ceylon, including early Pāli expert Rhys Davids, who was one of the first scholars to bring a textual bias to the current study of Buddhism, especially in the West. Many Japanese scholar-monks, such as D.T. Suzuki, were interested in representing their religious practices to the outside world and participated in debates about the various forms of Buddhism. Sri Lankan and Thai scholar-monks also sought to study and promote their own religious practices during the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries. These many streams fed into a conversation that came to establish the current meaning of the term Theravāda. Perreira also alludes to the role of politics: the British presence in the region enabled scholars to study Buddhism systematically in the first place. Behind the speeches on 25 May 1950 also stood the interests of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism to assert domination over the newly-independent country. At the same time, Ambedkar, leader of the Dalits in India, was keenly interested in establishing a “pure” form of Buddhism to which the Dalits could convert as a form of liberation from the oppression of the Hindu caste system.

The role of foreign scholarship in fostering local understanding is one that Arthid Sheravanichkul continues in his contribution. Looking through the correspondence of King Chulalongkorn (reigned 1868-1910) of Siam with Prince Narisranuvattiwong, the author finds evidence that the king’s ideas of a division between Hīnayāna (a now disused term, which “Theravāda” has come to replace) and Mahāyāna Buddhism, were influenced by contact with Japanese and Western scholarship in English. Although the king was not overly concerned with imparting great meaning to a division, Arthid argues that the very idea of a division arose through contact with outside scholars and scholarship.

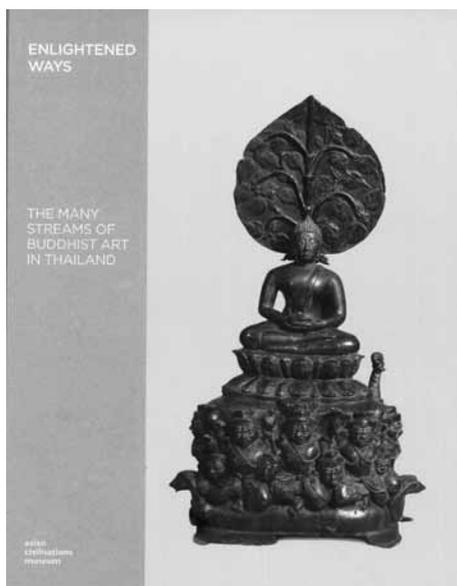
Some contributors raise the question of using a more appropriate, indigenous term to talk about Buddhist practices, lineages, and communities in the past. Carbine, for example, offers the term *sāsana*, a Pāli term commonly understood simply as “religion.” Perhaps this is close to how some people in the past may have articulated

their own sense of community and practice. However, I would argue that it is risky to try to find a term for something that did not yet exist, however strong some of its antecedents may be. To take a nod from the world of American celebrity, can we speak of the “Religion/Practice/Lineage Latterly Known as Theravāda” before it was so christened? The Western academic tradition arranges the world into discrete categories and piles them into ever higher superordinate structures. While notions of ethnicity, identity, religion – just a few of the big categories of modern thought – all have their roots “out there” in the observable world, the very act of bringing together disparate phenomena under a delineated rubric and giving it a name is in itself an act of creation and birth.

*How Theravāda is Theravāda?* features rich illustrations of the art, personalities, artifacts, and architecture of the Theravāda world. While some of these plates support the text, others are rather more examples of cultural riches, with a decided emphasis on the art of Thailand. Readers who are not specialists of Thailand would no doubt have appreciated the use of dates in preference to the exclusive use of reign names in some of the contributions. The essays in this volume together offer a highly useful reminder that many of the categories of thought that we use to understand the past are of very recent provenance, and that the solidity that we attribute to the past may disappear under closer investigation.

Patrick McCormick

*Enlightened Ways: The Many Streams of Buddhist Art in Thailand* edited by Heidi Tan (Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2012). ISBN: 978-981-07-4628-5.



I was indeed fortunate in 2013 to have been able to visit the fascinating exhibition at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) in Singapore for which this book served as the accompanying catalogue. I was overcome not only by the quality of the exhibits that Principal Curator Heidi Tan and her team had managed to assemble from the ACM's own collection, the Thai National Library and several National Museums around Thailand, but the superb way they had been arranged and thoughtfully displayed. The lighting and the clear signage were excellent. Fortunately for those who could not travel to Singapore, there is still an opportunity to examine