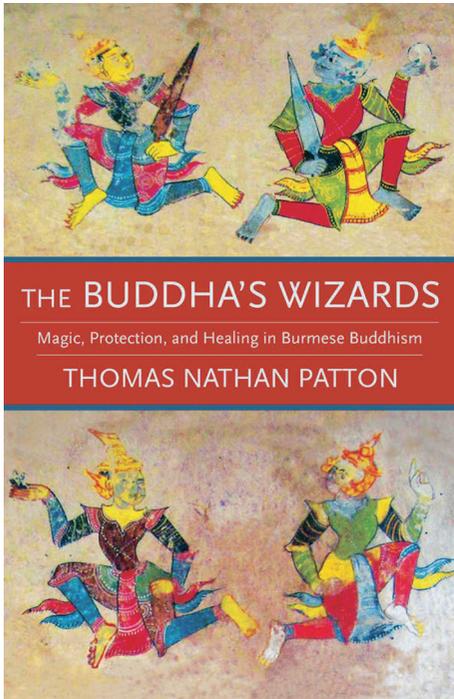


*The Buddha's Wizards: Magic, Protection, and Healing in Burmese Buddhism* by Thomas Nathan Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. ISBN: 9780231187602 (hardback), US\$60; ISBN: 9780231187619 (paperback), US\$26.



Myanmar (Burma), known for its stunning pagodas, its repressive military and its recent struggles with democracy, might also be known for its wizards: *weizzā*, or sometimes *weikza*. There is a voluminous literature in English and French on these semi-divine beings, who travel back and forth between their world and the human world to provide comfort, reassurance, health and protection. The Buddhist saints, who may appear in dreams and visitations, intervene at important points in the lives of devotees and communicate by means of feelings that are experienced in meditative states, telepathy, divination, and prayer. Iconic representations of the *weizzā* take the form of statues and images in chromolithographs and photographs. The sensations elicited by contemplating and touching these objects are visceral. Affect is a religious goal in itself, and the relationship between a devotee and his or her *weizzā* is so

personal that it can last a lifetime.

Thomas Patton's new book focuses on the most famous figure of this devotion, Chief Wizard Bo Min Gaung, who was born around 1885 and who "exited" this world in 1952. By some accounts he was a gruff man, who was thought to betray a touch of madness. He spoke little and mumbled nonsense, according to one witness. Even before his departure, his teachings and reputation had earned him a cult-like following, and in Myanmar today his hagiographic status is second only to the Buddha. A chapter titled "Women of the Wizard King" features a female medium, who channels Bo Min Gaung. Pagodas associated with Bo Min Gaung, found throughout Myanmar, infuse people in their field of influence with the supernatural power of success. These so-called nine-cubit pagodas, which have also been built in Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and the USA, protect territory and purify it of non-Buddhist ideologies. Buddhism has enemies, and the spiritual powers of the Buddha's wizards are called upon to defend the religion.

Patton's book, which he is in the process of writing during fieldwork, becomes a point of discussion with informants, who are keen to tell him what he should say. He relates their advice in the last chapter, *Wizards in the Shadows*, a crafty way of plotting the story that turns all he has said about the benefits of *weizzā* devotion on its head, because the wizards and their followers pose a threat to the authorities and to other Buddhists. For the government, belief in the powers of the *weizzā* represents an

insurgency that challenges stability and the legitimacy of those holding political power. *Weizzā* adherents practise *samatha*, a semi-secretive, esoteric form of meditation leading to supernatural powers that might be harnessed for rebellion, a phenomenon familiar in mainland Southeast Asian Buddhism. Other Burmese Buddhists regard the *weizzā* path pejoratively as mundane. Adherents are thought to be preoccupied with immortality, riches, or love, and charlatans, who offer their services for a fee, wait in the shadows to exploit the vulnerable.

The book's design leaves something to be desired. A glossary would have helped. Important Burmese terms are explained in the text, but I found myself looking up words in the index if I needed to refresh my memory, and the information was sometimes incomplete. In the middle of the book are thirty-three black and white illustrations, all used to great effect in Patton's discussion, yet there is no list of plates in the front matter. The bibliography deserved closer attention. It is as if copy editors and proofreaders decided to go for coffee and forgot to come back to finish the job. Items cited in footnotes are missing in the bibliography. Some of these are obvious typos, and maybe the author was supposed to catch them at the final proof stage, but such slips are not a good recommendation for the Columbia University Press brand.

The introduction, listed in italics in the table of contents with pagination in Roman numerals, makes it look like the book's front matter, but it is not prefatory. It is vital to the book, for it is there that Patton announces his project by framing the Burmese wizards and their devotees within affect theory that explores the emotional components in religious life. Like all new fields vying for attention in the academic marketplace, theorists show off their specialist language, so one stumbles over actants, agentic potency and oneirocritical (the interpretation of dreams). Such jargon hinders understanding rather than facilitating it.

Patton is a conscientious, thoughtful, and engaging guide along the *weizzā* path. His powers of expression are more than adequate to convey the complexities of the enduring *weizzā* tradition and its relationship to canonical Buddhism, and I wish only that he had abstained from quoting so many of his muses. This reader would have preferred to hear how he might interpret the authorities in his own words. Patton's visual and evocative language suggests that this kind of material could be augmented by multimedia. Academic publishing needs to realise the potential of digital technology.

Craig J. Reynolds