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Peter Skilling, Jason A. Carbine, Claudio Cicuzza, Santi Pakdeekham, eds. *How Theravāda Is Theravāda? Exploring Buddhist Identities*. Published with the support of the Khyentse Foundation and the Fragile Palm Leaves Foundation. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books. xxxvi + 620 pp. \$60.00 (paper), ISBN 978-616215044-9.

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In recent years scholars of Theravāda Buddhism have joined the efforts of colleagues working in other areas of Buddhist studies to reconsider some of the foundational assumptions that have rarely been questioned by their predecessors. Similar to the critical revision of the history of Chan Buddhism undertaken by scholars in the 1980s and early 90s, there have been moves afoot in Theravāda studies to examine and revise the histories that the tradition has told about itself. It is helpful to view the recent volume *How Theravāda is Theravāda?* as an early effort in this process to synthesize the research of various scholars that may contribute to the revision of “common knowledge” of Theravāda Buddhism. This work represents a significant but still preliminary contribution to the recasting of scholarship about Theravāda along more critical lines. The volume has certainly not exhausted the possibilities for pursuing research in this field with more subtlety and historical accuracy. It does, however, outline some new ways forward for the study of Theravāda and thus represents an important publication for the field.

The quizzical title of the work suggests that the contributors will provide us with an answer to questions about the nature of Theravāda Buddhism. Answers are given, albeit indirectly and somewhat tentatively. We learn from the collection of generally excellent essays that “Theravāda” is a term with multiple meanings and variable relevance, and that the modern notion of “Theravāda Buddhism” as an ancient and homogeneous school of Buddhism is a decidedly anachronistic one (p. 452). One element missing from the work is a sustained discussion about the modern representation of what “Theravāda” comprises. Several essays even seem to avoid using the term altogether. This makes it difficult to go very far in assessing how much the specific, local expressions of Theravāda in South and Southeast Asia correspond to the ideal pictures that most scholars and students seem to hold. The subtitle, “Exploring Buddhist Identities,” re-

ceives more attention, however, as many of the essays deal with questions of affiliation. The title of the first essay, Rupert Gethin’s stimulating “Was Buddhaghosa a Theravādin?,” sets the stage for several authors to explore the salience of the term “Theravāda” for Buddhist monks and laypersons in certain parts of South and Southeast Asia. To be sure, anyone who has previously read Peter Skilling’s important article “Theravāda in History” can already guess the answer.[1] The term “Theravāda,” as explained by Skilling again in the introduction to this volume, was originally used to describe a particular monastic lineage and an accompanying textual transmission, and only later in the twentieth century did it acquire its common usage for a “school” of Buddhism to which people, doctrines, and rituals can somehow be said to belong (pp. xxii, xxix).

The essays that follow in this volume, many of which were developed out of a panel of the same name from the Fifteenth Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies in 2008, engage questions of association with “Theravāda” to varying degrees. Gethin’s essay provides an erudite analysis of the terms used to refer to a Buddhist identity in (Sri) “Laṅkā” in Pāli commentarial and chronicle texts. His research provides ample proof to support Skilling’s thesis. He relates, for instance, that there is little evidence for the use of the term “Theravāda” as a particular school or lineage in the majority of *aṭṭhakathā* commentaries. Instead, he outlines how Buddhist identity in the island was derived in different ways across at least four historical phases: beginning with a nonsectarian affiliation with a pan-Indic lineage of ancient elder monks (*theras*), through a more specific identification with the “Analysts” or Vibhajjavādins from an early council of monks in India, into a more exclusive identity located in the Mahāvihāra monastic lineage in the island (pp. 54-55). Doubts raised about the historical relevance of the term “Theravāda” in this first essay are repeated by other authors in the volume. Lilian Handlin’s

essay examines inscriptional and visual evidence from eleventh- to twelfth-century Pagan to uncover a plurality of terms and formulations to describe what most scholars have called “Theravāda Buddhism” in Burma. Handlin finds, however, that the Theravāda label was an unfamiliar one during King Kyanzittha’s reign. Instead, she cites vernacular temple inscriptions to argue that the king defined religious identity in broad, societal terms and urged his subjects to become “good people” rather than Theravāda Buddhists per se (p. 180). Gethin’s and Handlin’s works, in different ways, draw similar conclusions. Authoritative Buddhist identities in ancient Sri Lanka and medieval Burma were fashioned out of affiliations and relationships to leading monks and kings. The term “Theravāda” in itself was not utilized to connote antiquity or legitimacy.

The significance of the label “Theravāda” is investigated further in different ways in essays authored by Max Deeg, Anne Blackburn, and Arthid Sheravanichkul. Deeg approaches this issue by surveying Chinese scriptural texts and travel accounts by Chinese pilgrims to arrive at how terms such as *sthavira*, *thera*, and *sthaviravāda* were used and understood by Buddhists outside of what is sometimes called the “Theravāda world.” He finds that Chinese authors frequently used the term *shangzuo* to refer to *sthavira/thera* in works from the late fourth and early fifth centuries CE. This term, however, was generally stripped of its sectarian meanings and was used instead to refer to a high-ranking monk. The notion of a distinct “Sthavira sect” (*shangzuo-bu*) arose early on as certain monks in China became acquainted with the idealized sectarian history of Buddhism in India. It was not until later, when travelers such as Xuanzang (who never visited the island personally) sought to describe Buddhism in Sri Lanka, that a sectarian identity was attributed to the “sthaviras,” but curiously was linked to the Abhayagiri monks who also accepted Mahāyāna teachings.

Blackburn, for her part, explores how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century monks in “Lankā” expressed affiliations to particular conceptions of monastic lineage. She directs our attention to the various terms used by Sri Lankan monks in their articulation of monastic identity and difference. Therein she makes the important observation about a historical shift in the self-referential claims of Siyam Nikāya monks, who were responsible for the revival of the higher ordination ceremony from abroad. In the eighteenth century, such monks constructed their authority in terms of the ritual boundaries they established for conducting ordination ceremonies in the island. There is scant evidence of attention to histories of

lineage, much less the use of terms like “Theravāda” in works composed by monks in this order. It is not until the nineteenth century and the increased exposure to Orientalist scholarship and evangelical missionaries that Sri Lankan monks begin to formulate “pan-nikāyan” interests and identities. In this climate, some begin to argue for the purity of the Mahāvihāra lineage, which was called by the monk Hikkaḍuvē Sumaṅgala *theravaṃsa*, to refer to a monastic tradition shared by Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia (p. 285). Blackburn acknowledges the shifting contextual bases for expressing one’s affiliation to a particular monastic identity and judiciously warns against privileging the idea of the Theravāda over other forms and labels of monastic self-understanding.

Arthid Sheravanichkul’s essay focuses on the visions of Buddhism offered by Thai royal scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His research indicates that the Theravāda label was adopted comparatively late in Thai circles. He notes that the distinction made between “Hīnayāna” and “Mahāyāna” became salient only after 1868, as seen for example in correspondence between King Chulalongkorn and Prince Narisranuvattiwong. By mining letters written by this king, Arthid Sheravanichkul is able to trace the development of ideas relating to different forms of Buddhism. These moves are significant because they lead to efforts to attribute certain features of Thai Buddhism to “Mahāyāna elements” related to the use of Sanskrit and other archaeological elements (p. 424). This apparent fact was said to exist despite the recognition that Thais later inherited the “Hīnayāna” from Sri Lanka. The essay helps us understand how efforts by the Thai royalty to understand a shared Buddhist past led to consulting works of Western scholarship and the adoption of typologies and labels employed therein. The term “Theravāda,” moreover, became popular only after the 1953 meeting of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Colombo.

Other essays in *How Theravāda is Theravāda?* seek to query the boundaries and practices of what is often attributed to the Theravāda Buddhist school. The authors of these chapters show less interest in how the name is deployed than in how the school has been conceived in different points in history. Lance Cousins, Jason Carbine, Olivier de Bernon, and Peter Skilling make important contributions to this end. Cousins investigates the idea of what constitutes the Theravāda by surveying what a wide range of Pāli texts reveals about the teachings of the Abhayagiri Nikāya. As one of the dominant sects that was often depicted as an opponent of the Mahāvihāra Nikāya, the Abhayagiri represents something of a “test case” for understanding monastic identity in an-

cient Sri Lanka. Cousins argues, based upon a close reading of commentarial literature and the *Vimuttimaggā*, that the Abhayagiri sect was not significantly different from the Mahāvihāra sect. He points out that there is no evidence that conclusively establishes a separate *nikāya* at the Abhaya monastery before King Mahāsena's reign in the third century CE, and that one may conclude that the two monastic communities had fairly similar canons of scriptures. Aside from providing a valuable summary of information about the Abhayagiri sect, Cousins's essay implicitly cautions us not to go too far in identifying the "Theravāda" sect with the Mahāvihāra Nikāya.

Meanwhile, Carbine seeks to show how Buddhists in fifteenth-century Ramaññadesa (or lower Myanmar/Burma) supplemented doctrinally based self-representations of *dhammavādī* (professing the true doctrine) and *vibhajjavādī* (professing the doctrine which analyzes), which were substitutes for Theravāda in the Kalyāṇī Inscriptions, with spatially based identities that derived from particular ritual boundaries (*sīmā*). He finds that concerns with the purification and extension of the *Sāsana* were integrally related to the establishment of proper ritual boundaries for monastic ordination. And it was royal interests in purifying the *Sāsana* in Ramaññadesa that led to the sending of monks to Sri Lanka in order to be ordained in a pure *simsā* (p. 252). Carbine helpfully concludes that in contrast to doctrinally based identities that were used infrequently and rather narrowly, a term like "*Sāsana*" functioned better to capture a wider Buddhist identity encompassing a "variety of locally and historically definable aspects of thought and practice" (p. 266). In other words, Carbine warns us not to overlook ritual practice in the construction of Buddhist identity that is nominally and rather recently called "Theravāda." Bernon makes a complementary argument in a survey of texts that circulated in nineteenth-century Cambodia. He claims that a Theravāda identity is neither as uniform nor straightforward as its association with a fixed number of Pāli canonical texts often suggests. Instead, he describes the central role occupied by vernacular texts, which are often overshadowed by attention given to Pāli manuscripts.

Peter Skilling's chapter accomplishes two related purposes. First, he illustrates by means of references to architecture, art, and inscription that "Bangkok Buddhism" was a heterogeneous, interactive, and creative phenomenon in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Second, he offers a strong argument in favor of recognizing vernacular contributions to the formation and conception of Buddhist traditions in Southeast Asia. This argument is encountered with increasing frequency, but it

is made convincingly and appropriately in this volume. Skilling describes how King Rāma I (r. 1782-1809) sought to reorganize the Thai Sangha by, among other things, restoring and remodeling a late Ayutthaya-period temple called Wat Phra Chetuphon. The installation of Buddha images and painting of murals in the temple accompanied other initiatives, including the sponsoring of a monastic council to recite select Buddhist texts, that were intended to reinforce the king's image as a "Bodhisatva King." The author's attention to the details of local efforts to restore the vitality of the *Sāsana* helps us to understand how new regional centers of Buddhism could be inaugurated.

The second part of Skilling's essay is directed at a critique of Pāli-centered visions of Theravāda Buddhism. His robust defense of the importance of vernacular traditions takes as its starting point the concept of the "Pāli imaginaire" as used by Steven Collins in an important study of Buddhist thought as evidenced in Pāli literature.[2] Skilling contests Collins's notion of the Pāli imaginaire as a "stable and cohesive ideology" that suggests to him a kind of "atemporal substratum" derived from certain Pāli texts that is supposed to lie behind historical and civilizational change (pp. 336-337). Whether this is what Collins has in mind is debatable.[3] Yet this critique applies more generally to those who posit a coherent Theravāda ideology gleaned from a corpus of Pāli texts. Skilling's call to reimagine what comprises "Theravāda" on the basis of both vernacular and less well-known Pāli texts that have not been edited and published by the Pali Text Society offers us a helpful corrective to those who continue to portray Theravāda strictly in terms of Pāli works that are well known to Western scholars. Significantly, Skilling's critique is geared not toward the concept of the "imaginaire," but rather toward the restriction of its usage to texts in the Pāli language. He suggests that the so-called Pāli imaginaire should be viewed as a pool of ideas that functions in tandem with various "vernacular imaginaires" as the source materials for architecture, mural paintings, images, sermons, liturgies, and rituals (p. 347). His chapter makes a strong and persuasive case that any depiction of Theravāda Buddhism that ignores vernacular traditions will be a historically and culturally impoverished one.

Finally, the lengthy, concluding chapter written by Todd LeRoy Perreira attempts to situate the label "Theravāda" as a modern construct with a recent genealogy. His essay begins in Colombo at the World Fellowship of Buddhists conference in 1950, where he traces the adoption of "Theravāda" to take the place of the pejorative designation "Hīnayāna" (or "Lesser Vehicle") in referring to monastic and lay Buddhists in South and Southeast

Asia. Not only did this decision formally dispense with the use of the unflattering “Hīnayāna” label, it also linked “Theravāda” with the oldest and purest form of Buddhism allegedly known to exist. Perreira’s argument is important for historicizing the label “Theravāda” so that one may see how its connotations of antiquity and authenticity were largely acquired within the last century. The deployment of this term starting in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has led, ironically, to the idea that Theravāda signified both the most ancient teaching of the Buddha and the most modern form of Buddhism. However, as Perreira argues, the use of the term to describe a particular school of Buddhism comprising “Theravāda Buddhist” monks and laypeople is a relatively recent invention.

Perreira’s chapter combines elegant prose and numerous illustrations to support his reconstruction of the modern genealogy of Theravāda Buddhism. It complements Gethin’s study discussed above by demonstrating that the use of the term “Theravāda” by actual Buddhists was a relatively recent phenomenon. There is at least one place, however, where Perreira seems to exaggerate his claims. For instance, he asserts that until about a hundred years ago, “Theravāda” was a “little known literary term” associated with texts recited by the early community of disciples (p. 466). While the term may have been used in a more restrictive sense prior to the modern period, to posit that it was an unfamiliar designation found in some texts seems to be an overstatement. The association with the monastic tradition with *theras* appears well established, and the appearance of “Theravāda” in ancient texts shows that the term did not require any special explanation or gloss. It may be more accurate to conclude that although “Theravāda” was not a common way to describe a Buddhist identity prior to the twentieth century, it was still recognizable as one way to designate the lines of continuity in texts and practices associated with monastic lineages that espoused the teachings of ancient *theras* and, by extension, the Buddha himself.

On a more critical note, for a volume that interrogates the accuracy and utility of a term like “Theravāda,” it is surprising to find much less attention paid to the use of proper names for lands and territories. One finds, for instance, several different names used to refer to the island of Sri Lanka—including, “Laṅkā,” “Ceylon,” “Laṅkādīpa,” and “Sri Lanka.” This variety of names is only partly explained. One author asserts that “Laṅkā” is preferable to “Sri Lanka,” since the latter is anachronistic when speaking of the island in pre-modern times (p. 1). Another author explains that the use of the term “Laṅkā” underscores historical distance from the contemporary nation-

state (p. 276). Other usages simply appear without explanation. There are problems with this inconsistency, not the least because variations on the full name “Sri Lanka” can also be found in some premodern texts (e.g., *siri lak*), and such sensitivity to the propriety of names is not similarly extended to the case of “India” (instead of, say, “Bharata” or “Jāmbudvīpa”). How should we decide what to use in the case of “Ayutthaya”/“Siam”/“Thailand”?-Scholars of Theravāda understand well that the names given to countries often have powerful political resonances (e.g., “Burma” or “Myanmar”), and this raises questions about who is authorized to name or change a name. The decision to use “Ceylon” seems oddly inappropriate to describe monastic lineages in the early centuries of the Common Era. Furthermore, the attempt to standardize the use of “Laṅkā” for premodern Sri Lanka seems improperly selective and “Pāli-centric,” particularly since no such uniformity in nomenclature existed in the island. It also gives rise to the unfortunate adjectival form “Lankan,” which is clearly anachronistic and awkward in its own way. Why one can retain the use of “Theravāda” with care and circumspection but cannot do the same for “Sri Lanka” is not adequately explained. Perhaps because it is not at all possible to do so; nonetheless the contrast with Theravāda is glaring.[4]

In sum, *How Theravāda is Theravāda?* represents an important collection of essays that functions as a corrective to conventional, often inaccurate views about Theravāda Buddhism. The many insights to be gained from the various essays therein clearly outweigh their far fewer shortcomings. It is a welcome addition to the field that invites critical self-reflection on the part of scholars while also suggesting some useful pathways for future research. Investigations of Theravāda should no longer take its identity as something fixed and ancient. Its histories comprise plural, sometimes competing accounts about what constitutes the Dharma and how it has been transmitted over the centuries. And its sources exist in different material forms and different languages. We are indebted to the authors of these essays for their contributions toward revising the study of Theravāda Buddhism in ways that cannot and should not be ignored.

Notes

[1]. Peter Skilling, “Theravāda in History,” *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies* 11 (2009): 61-93.

[2]. See Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[3]. In an early section of his work, Collins notes “The

Pali imaginaire is not equal to the imaginaire (still less 'the culture') of premodern Southern Asian Buddhism, and obviously was only one element of civilization in Southern Asia." See Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, 76.

[4]. For a different critique of the use of "Lanka" in scholarly works, see Ananda Abeysekara, "Sri Lanka, Postcolonial 'Locations of Buddhism,' Secular Peace: Sovereignty of Decision and Distinction," *interventions* 14, no. 2 (2012): 230-231.

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