

Preface

For the most part, the papers collected in this volume were first presented in conferences organized around central themes in Religious Studies, such as hagiography, sacred places, moments of death, and sin and repentance. In these conferences, multiple religious traditions were represented, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Daoism from Asia, and often Judeo-Christian traditions from Europe and North America. The topics and the style of analysis in these papers reflect this larger context. Though the material comes from one large tradition, and the discussion sometimes becomes technical, I do not privilege the insider's viewpoint but rather adopt the outsider's comparative perspective.

These papers explore these themes through the focused reading of a variety of works from the Chinese Buddhist canon. Some of these texts are large compilations produced in China; others are Chinese translations of Indian Buddhist scriptures. The discussion attempts to retrace the text's evolution and the lines of thinking that guided the process of compilation.

Buddhist practices in India, Central Asia, and China appear in different kinds of narratives in the texts that these papers examine. Miracle stories demonstrate the efficacy of the practice. In the scriptural passages translated from Indic languages, the setting is typically the India of the Buddha's time. These passages plausibly describe the Indian and Central Asian practices at the time when the original versions of the scriptures were composed. In the biographies of 'eminent monks', the setting is medieval China. Imaginary stories about future persecutions often mention distant cosmic realms. These stories feature physical objects used in the distinctively Buddhist practices, such as Buddha images, monastic robes, or begging bowls. Esoteric Buddhist rituals produced distinctive narratives about practices.

The papers identify gaps, ambivalences, and tension in the stories about Buddhist practice. For example, the examination of literary sources for monastic biographies calls attention to the ambiguous relationship between the formal records preserved in *stūpa* inscriptions and many miracle stories told about the subjects. Likewise, the compilation of the sectarian lineage histories necessitated balancing the concerns of local monasteries against the universalistic agenda of lineage histories. In addition, practical concerns of monastic life, spelled out in detail in *vinaya* rules, contrast with the supernatural visions of special objects related in the stories about the preservation of the Buddha's teaching in the Age of the Decline of the Teaching. These gaps, ambivalences and tensions enable us to appreciate the breadth and richness of Buddhist practices.

Among the forces that shaped these stories, two stand out. The strategy of legitimizing specific practices by attributing them directly to the Buddha's teaching, preserved in scriptures, is stretched beyond ordinary limits in elaborate stories told about the new revelation of hitherto unknown records claimed to have been preserved only in heaven. The second strategy of demonstrating the practices' efficacy in miracle stories often had very specific local roots, affiliated with well-known sacred sites. In Esoteric Buddhist narratives, the efficacy of the ritual is demonstrated variously in visions, image miracles, and cosmic visualization.