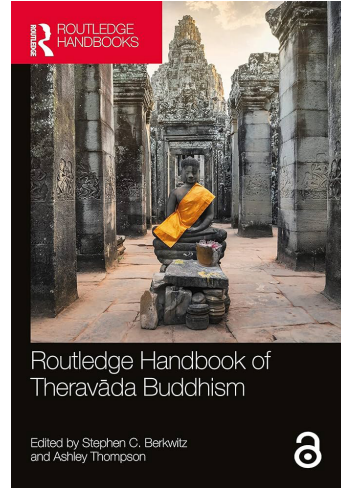


# Book Review

Berkwitz, Stephen C., and Ashley Thompson, eds. *Routledge Handbook of Theravāda Buddhism*. Milton Park and New York: Publisher, 2022. Pp. 394.



Over the past decade and a half or so there have been several important shifts in how scholars working within the field of Theravāda Buddhist studies have engaged local, regional, and transregional Buddhist peoples, traditions, communities, polities, etc., especially with regard to categories of representation, modes of practice, frames of cultural reference, and contexts of social engagement. A primary impetus for these shifts has been an effort to figure out how various terms like Theravāda, languages like Pāli, and communities like saṅgha fit with the incredible historical diversity and variation in lands and places and times that get labeled by such terms as ‘Theravāda’ or ‘Pāli’ Buddhism. The *Routledge Handbook of Theravāda Buddhism* constitutes a milestone in these shifts.

That the *Handbook* carries forward the kind of work and agenda developed in previous efforts by Theravāda studies scholars is clear. For instance, authors in the *Handbook* as well as scholars in other contexts have engaged the question of the term ‘Theravāda’ itself, its usefulness, past and present, and whether and when it would be prudent to invoke or draw upon different categories as analytical foci, theoretical objects, and/or as communal or individual

expressions.<sup>1</sup> The *Handbook*, however, is far more capacious and far more ambitious in its purpose and scope than many if not most works of its kind. The goal is to offer not only a snapshot of the current state of the field of Theravāda Buddhist studies but also to highlight Theravāda Buddhism as *civilisational*. On my read of the central arguments of the work, this means several crucial things. First of all, it means rethinking the study of Pāli language, the Pāli *Tipiṭaka*, and a Pāli-oriented understanding of saṅgha as the primary foci for an understanding and analysis of Theravāda Buddhism, even while recognising—and continuing to study assiduously—their importance for a great number of Buddhists in places like Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, etc., past and present. Second, it means figuring out the historical and cultural relations of, for instance, Pāli and vernacular forms of textuality, ritual, art, aesthetics, and materiality in such places. Third, it means attention to a potentially infinite variability in the dynamic relations of Buddhist ideas, practices, and geo-historical and social circumstances that emerge across relevant times and landscapes. As expressed in the *Handbook*:

In those countries where Pāli and vernacular Buddhist traditions of textuality, ritual, and material culture have predominated for many centuries—for example, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia—it is possible, we argue still, to speak of Theravāda as civilizational. By this we mean that Theravāda traditions have generated and shaped many different ways that people think and act within a specific cultural setting at the same time that the same people have generated and shaped Theravāda. This mutual, dynamic creation approaches the notion of *habitus* mentioned earlier and is never short of the political, economic, and social frameworks within which the *sāsana*<sup>[2]</sup> functions. Family and social relationships

---

<sup>1</sup> E.g., Skilling, Carbine, Cicuzza, and Pakdeekham, eds., *How Theravāda is Theravāda? Exploring Buddhist Identities*.

<sup>[2]</sup> (This bracketed note added by the reviewer.) *Sāsana* is variously translated as the Buddha's 'dispensation', 'tradition', 'religion', 'body of knowledge', 'institution'.

are, in part, embodied and enacted in accordance with particular Buddhist ideas and practices just as the latter are shaped by specific geo-historical and social circumstances. It is these settings, where Theravāda can be said to be in this way ‘civilizational,’ which are the focus of the majority of the chapters. As mentioned earlier, Theravāda is also practiced as a minority tradition in other countries and regions. It is on the largest scale, encompassing specific Theravādin civilizations as well as these other Theravādin groupings, that we speak of ‘Theravāda civilization.’ (8)

This perspective on Theravāda as civilisational, then, constitutes the driving force behind the capacious structure and composition of the *Handbook*, which offers readers an introduction followed by four parts containing a total of twenty-three chapters. The introduction itself will be useful for both non-specialists and specialists. It distils an understanding of Theravāda and its range of application and use that emerges in the collection’s parts and chapters. The parts and chapters consist of Part I Ideals/Ideals, with chapters on Theravāda, Pāli, Circulations, Statecraft, Reform, and Tradition; Part II Practices/Persons with chapters on Merit, Meditation, Repetition, Filial Piety, Laity, Discipline, and Funerals; Part III Texts/Teachings with chapters on Canons, Abhidhamma, Vamsa, Merit, and Bilingualism; and Part IV Images/Imaginations with chapters on Visual Narratives, Icons, Affect, Deities, and Mons.

In the introduction, Berkwitz and Thompson offer a synopsis of Theravāda as currently used:

In current parlance, the Pāli language term *Theravāda* refers to a distinct school of Buddhism with a relatively conservative orientation toward texts, teaching, imagery, and ritual that is predominant in Sri Lanka and the mainland Southeast Asian countries of Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. Theravāda Buddhist communities, loosely defined, are also found in Nepal, Bangladesh, India, Vietnam, Yunnan province in southwest China, and in parts of North and South America, Europe, and Africa. Translated variously as the ‘tradition,’ ‘school,’ ‘opinion,’ or ‘decree’ (*vāda*, literally, ‘the speech’) of the Elders (*thera*, as in

more senior and knowledgeable monastics), the Theravāda refers in the first instance to a set of texts, teachings, monastic lineages, and associated practices anchored in the Pāli language associated with the Buddha himself and other ancient teachers who were among his followers. The term's association with a large, extant collection of Pāli texts, including a complete Vinaya or monastic disciplinary code, means that for the better part of two thousand years some communities of monks (and for some centuries, female renunciants or 'nuns') were ordained and taught according to a shared body of Buddhist literature. This canon of Pāli texts possesses significance and authority, partly because the texts are ascribed to the Buddha's own teachings said to have been memorized and written down by his disciples a few centuries after his death. (2)

Following this synopsis, Berkwitz and Thompson specify various other concepts and points that further ground an understanding of Theravāda. Their comments cover the Pāli language and canon; plurivocality (including the fact that 'Theravāda can have a presence in the absence of Pāli language usage per se') (2); the salience (or lack thereof) of the term Theravāda in different times, places, and sources; the wide expansion of the use of the term Theravāda in the twentieth century; their hesitations to label Theravāda a mere anachronism when used in regard to the past; the critical term *sāsana* that appears in various places throughout the book; Mahāvihāra and other constructions of identity and tradition; geographic multipolarity/ places of exchange and transmission; various textual traditions, genres; material cultures; merit making; artistic and narrative representations; funerary practices; objects-in-practice, ritual boundaries and boundary markers (*śīmā*), and more (2–7).<sup>3</sup> With their comments on these and other topics, Berkwitz and Thompson offer a series of carefully articulated entry points into the research-based chapters that are to come as well as emphasise a point that seems to be tacitly affirmed by

---

<sup>3</sup> Among these topics, *śīmā* are referred to in a few places in the chapters of the *Handbook* but not addressed in detail. See, e.g., sources ranging from Kieffer-Pülz, *Die Śīmā*, to Carbine and Davis, eds., *Śīmās*.

all of them: if Theravāda is anything at all, it ‘is only ever localized, even as it makes its place in broader worlds’ (322).<sup>4</sup>

Case-study oriented in their methodologies and analytical enterprises, each chapter, written by a specialist in the field, takes on a particular topic related to Theravāda. Here I present a short summary of each chapter. (Please note that in the below I have for the most part opted for judiciously selected quotations from or for each chapter that condense their main points well and thus offer readers of this review who are interested in further engagement with one or more of the chapters a sense of what to expect when doing so.)

**Part I Ideas/Ideals** consists of six chapters. Chapter 1, ‘Theravāda’ (Sven Bretfeld), uses the two oldest preserved Pāli *vaṃsas* (dating to the fourth and fifth centuries CE respectively) as well as a late fourteenth-century Sinhala work to show ‘how the Buddhist lineages we are accustomed to calling “Theravāda Buddhism” today have participated in historical discourses of institutional identity building and self-positioning against the backdrop of a Buddhist world increasingly characterized by intra-religious diversification and sectarianism.’ (15) Chapter 2, ‘Pāli’ (Alastair Gornal), ‘suggest[s] that Pāli’s use in the tradition can be analyzed through three interrelated but distinct modes, namely, as a language of authoritative tradition, organization and reform, and indexical power.’ (53) Gornal argues that while scholarship has tended to focus on one use or the other

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf, ‘[w]hat can be identified as Theravāda Buddhist religious culture is unique wherever it is found on the ground.<sup>1</sup> Monolithic constructions of the religion need serious qualifications or should be avoided entirely. The same is true in this specific instance regarding the relative importance of deities in different cultural contexts.’ *Handbook*, 343. The note in this passage indicates that ‘[i]t is also actually more common to hear religious people in these national or cultural contexts refer to their religion as Sinhala Buddhism, Burmese Buddhism, Thai Buddhism, Lao Buddhism or Khmer Buddhism, and so on rather than to Theravāda per se (Holt 2017, 3-4).’ *Handbook*, 352. This reviewer would also argue that, in Myanmar at least, it is far more common to hear Buddhists use some variation of the term *sāsana* (B. *thāṭhanā*) when referring to the religion of the Buddha and their relations to it.

as the ‘authentic expression of Theravāda tradition’, these uses ‘are nearly always interdependent and do not necessarily relate to each other in a form of hierarchy.’ (53–54) Moreover, ‘bringing together these different uses of Pali, which are often dealt with in different disciplinary domains, into a single framework affords [scholars] greater analytical flexibility when describing the diverse local forms of Theravāda Buddhism and when thinking critically about how Pāli defines the tradition.’ (54) Chapter 3, ‘Circulations’ (Anne M. Blackburn) ‘propose[s] that [scholars could/should] explore the value of conceptualizing the expanding Pāli world in terms of “circulatory processes” rather than “networks,”’ so as to better understand how ‘interactive trans-regional [and local] processes interact with other processes (often deeply historical)—related to economy, statecraft, aesthetic preferences, cosmological understandings, and the like—already underway at those locales.’ (67) Chapter 4, ‘Statecraft’ (Patrice Ladwig) places less emphasis on the interactions of the saṅgha and kingship in Theravāda societies and ‘more emphasis on the creation of ritual and spatial centers’ in order to ‘argue that the role of [Theravāda (and other forms of?)] Buddhism in [premodern] population management was crucial in laying the foundations of what would become the modern state.’ (70) Chapter 5, ‘Reform’ (Anne Hansen and Anthony Lovenheim Irwin) analyses, with special attention to ‘concerns with orthopraxy (correctness of practice) and scriptural hermeneutics’, ‘how the Theravāda was constituted and reconstituted in the modern era [in South and mainland Southeast Asia] through a number of [decolonizing and other] reform movements that unfolded in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.’ (84) Chapter 6, ‘Tradition’ (Nirmala S. Salgado), ‘focus[es] on debates in Sri Lanka [with additional reference to developments Thailand and Myanmar] that have been formative in attempting to authorize who can say what about Theravāda’, particularly in regard to matters of contestation and power over a Theravāda *upasampadā* for bhikkhunis. (99)

**Part II Practices/Persons** consists of seven chapters. Chapter 7, ‘Merit’ (Juliane Schober), focuses especially on Myanmar and ‘argue[s] that merit-making [in Theravāda contexts] is... best understood as a social practice, discourse, and cultural mediation

about ethical conduct and giving [and that]... merit-making and the ethics of giving are integral to the production of social capital, authority, and hegemony [in those contexts].’ (115) Chapter 8, ‘Meditation’ (Pyi Phyo Kyaw and Kate Crosby), discusses various techniques and processes of meditational transformation, covering such topics as the stages of the path, the goal, defilements, textual sources, Pāli terms, the relation of Abhidhamma to meditation, and variations within and across different types/families of meditation (128). Chapter 9, ‘Repetition’ (Christoph Emmrich), ‘contribute[s], with the help of select passages from Theravāda texts, toward a shift from a geometrical and typological way of thinking about time to an event- and language-oriented one, involving speaker participation and linguistic self-reflexivity.’ (140) This involves addressing a series of questions about the roles of repetitions in ritual, textual composition (poetics), and doctrine (philosophy) (141). Chapter 10, ‘Filial Piety’ (Grégory Kourilsky), ‘consider[s] the place occupied by parents and ancestors in [Theravāda and other] Buddhist societies’ (156) to ultimately suggest that ‘[w]hile Indian and Chinese Buddhist scholars had to demonstrate that it was possible to be a pious child despite being a Buddhist, it has always been widely assumed, within Theravāda societies, that a good Buddhist *must* be a pious child.’<sup>5</sup> (167) Chapter 11, ‘Laity’ (Asanga Tilakaratne), argues against any lasting vestige of a problematic analytical distinction made in formative Buddhist studies scholarship between kammatic and nibbanic Buddhism. As put by Tilakaratne, ‘the exclusive attribution of kammatic Buddhism to the laity and nibbanic [Buddhism] to the monastics, in all probability, is not correct at any stage of the historical existence of Buddhism.’ (171) Tilakaratne discusses a variety of lay practices in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, showing how, in contemporary times, some such practices often entail activities one might label ‘nibbanic’ as well as a whole range of other activities that might not even be best described by other categories, such as ‘Buddhist modernism’ or ‘Protestant Buddhism’ (179). Chapter 12, ‘Discipline’ (Thomas Borchert), ‘argue[s] that to

---

<sup>5</sup> Emphasis in the original.

understand how [Theravāda] monastics are disciplined, [scholars] need to look at a much broader range of materials and contexts [beyond the *Vinaya*]... [including] the institutional, political, and communal contexts in which monastics not only learn the *Vinaya*, but... learn and ideally naturalize, what it means to be a proper nun or monk.' (183) Chapter 13, 'Funerals' (Katherine A. Bowie), identifies evidence that 'invites a consideration of the broader historical processes leading to changes in Theravāda Buddhist funerary practices... [and discusses] one such example by describing changes in funerary practices in central and northern Thailand over the course of the twentieth century.' (194) Bowie's study illustrates how Theravāda Buddhist funerary practices in different places and times have their 'own complex political history of changing religious beliefs and funerary practices [themselves]' (203).

**Part III Texts/Teachings** consists of five chapters. Chapter 14, 'Canons' (Peter Skilling), argues that '[f]reeing the "Theravāda canon" from the moorings of the "Pāli canon" opens space for appreciation of social and historical change and at the same time complicates the idea of canon immensely.' 'Theravāda', Skilling goes on to say, 'is not a monolithic tradition with a single and static canon and its head office in Sri Lanka. Letting the canonical cat out of the bag in which it has been confined by tradition and scholarship allows for the plurality of voices [inclusive of many different kinds of canons] that is Theravaṃsa to speak up.' (224) Chapter 15, 'Abhidhamma' (Rupert Gethin), considers the relations of the Theravāda Abhidhamma (the third basket of the Theravāda *Tipiṭaka*), 'whose origins must lie in the north but which developed and flourished in the south of India and Sri Lanka', with 'the Sarvastivāda Abhidharma, which set the Buddhist intellectual agenda in the north of India, directly influencing the development of schools of Mahāyāna Buddhist thought such as the Yogācāra, and became widely studied in China and Tibet.' (228) Gethin's comparative enterprise builds towards an understanding of 'two broad distinctive features of the Theravāda Abhidhamma', one concerning its listing of dharmas and the other its theory of the process of perception (240). These features indicate particular Theravāda conceptions of the path to awakening. Chapter 16, 'Vaṃsa' (Stephen C. Berkwitz),



argues that ‘those Buddhist traditions that come to be called “Theravāda” acquired their sense of coherence and authority from the *vaṃsas* [a genre of historical writing] that narrated their origins and expansions across time and space.’ (253) These texts integrated understandings of land, Buddha relics, Buddha images, saṅgha, dharma (teaching), *sāsana* (institutions), lineage, *Tipiṭaka*, polity, and society and were vital parts of the processes of transmission of the Buddha’s religion to Sri Lanka and peninsular Southeast Asia. Chapter 17, ‘Merit’ (Rita Langer), ‘examines how different texts and text genres understand the ways of making merit and what they reveal about the Buddhist practice past and present in Sri Lanka.’ (257) By considering commentarial literature, systematic exegetical Abhidhamma texts, poetic works, manuals, handbooks, Dhamma schoolbooks, and interviews, Langer provides insights into ‘a formalization of the moral dimension that is characteristic of Theravāda developments in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.’ (257) Chapter 18, ‘Bilingualism’ (Trent Walker), explores the widespread and distinctive phenomenon of the production of Indic-vernacular bitexts in the geographical regions where Theravāda Buddhism has spread (272).<sup>6</sup> The first part of the chapter discusses the steps in the creation of such bitexts and the second part sketches how these techniques of creation eventually developed into a range of ‘bitextual genres in first- and second-millennium Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.’ (272)

**Part IV Images/Imaginations** consists of five chapters. Chapter 19, ‘Visual Narratives’ (Samerchai Poolsuwan), considers mural traditions at Pagan dating from the late eleventh to the late thirteenth centuries and what they appear to convey about ‘the persistence of the matrix of interrelated local varieties of Pāli-based Buddhism’. Poolsuwan calls this matrix ‘the “medieval Theravāda” of Southeast

---

<sup>6</sup> Here, an Indic-vernacular bitext = ‘a bilingual text that stitches together portions in an Indic prestige language (usually Pāli but also Sanskrit in rare cases) and a local South or Southeast Asian vernacular, such as Arakanese, Burmese, Khmer, Mon, Sinhala, Tamil, Vietnamese, or various Southwestern Tai languages (Khün, Lanna, Lao, Lü, Siamese, etc.), typically in an interphrasal or interlinear arrangement.’ *Handbook*, 272.

Asia' (289). Based on the mural evidence, Poolsuwan identifies a variety of distinctive features of this medieval Theravāda (e.g., connections with Pāla period iconography in India, narratives not found in the canonical or commentarial Pāli sources, evidence for the Arañ *nikāya*) that may have played a role in holding off, at least for some time, the advances of newly introduced Sīhaḷa-forms of Theravāda orthodoxy. Chapter 20, 'Icons' (Ashley Thompson), 'points to the pertinence of a series of art-historical debates on emic and etic modes of interpretation for understanding how perceptions of the Buddha as embodying at once a historically conditioned figure and transcendent ideals can be played out on Southeast Asian ground.' (10) For this reviewer, one of the most interesting parts of the discussion in Thompson's chapter is that it 'add[s] another piece to the larger premodern Pāli world in which Cambodia is also integral... Sukhothai might be seen as a sort of pivot linking and foreshadowing what will become, in one inflection, the Sri Lanka–Bago–Lanna arc traced by Anne Blackburn and, in another, the Cambodia–Central Thailand arc that we might be tempted to name Ramayanic Buddhism.' (313, cf. 322) Chapter 21, 'Affect' (Chairat Polmuk), considers evidence from narratives about relics of the Buddha and from contemporary film and video art in Thailand and Cambodia from a vantage point that unites affect theory and Buddhist studies, and in so doing offers an interpretation of bodies, material environment, sensory experience, memory, and politics. Polmuk illustrates (a) 'how Buddhist concepts of relics offer a sustained exegesis and a culturally specific framework for probing affective potentialities of material objects', and (b) how '[f]ilms and video art discussed in [this] chapter [that draw on concepts and images of relics] instantiate the way in which contemporary artists incorporate nondoctrinal elements of Buddhism to interrogate a history of oppression [and trauma] rather than to convey Buddhist pedagogy.' (339–40) Chapter 22, 'Deities' (John Clifford Holt), discusses Buddhist devas in Sri Lanka, the *phi* of Thai-Lao religious culture, the *neak ta* of Cambodia, and the *nats* of Myanmar, ultimately highlighting different roles/patterns of deities in these places in relation to many possible 'historical and political factors'. For instance, in lands where the historical saturation of a particular

kind of kingship-authorising-Theravāda was weak, there has been less conformity to ideas and ideals emphasised in ‘the orthodoxy and orthopraxy of Theravāda or [an effort] to adopt exclusively a Theravāda epistemic regime’ (352). Chapter 23, ‘Mons’ (Patrick McCormick), explores one part of the historical conjuncture of British colonial rule in Burma, cosmopolitan scholars, and the prerogatives of local scholars and intellectuals in Burma.<sup>7</sup> This conjuncture fostered the emergence of distinctive theories of race, ethnicity, history, language, and religion, and above all sealed for many a powerful linkage between the Mon people and the Theravāda Buddhist civilisation of Burma and Southeast Asia (364).

From its beginning with a chapter dealing with intra-religious diversification and sectarianism to its concluding chapter dealing with a case of modern ethnolinguistic identity and its relation to the genesis of a particular and influential narrative of origins of Theravāda, there is a solid flow to the arrangement of parts and chapters. The chapter foci often build on and connect with one another, and in various places the chapter authors engage in direct conversation with one another, referring to each other’s work, either in the volume or in other contexts. The co-editors and authors of this *Handbook* as well as other scholars alike will no doubt debate points raised, methodologies employed, analytical and theoretical arguments made. For any interested in the topic of Theravāda Buddhism, a read of the entire book, end-to-end, will be time well spent. One piece of the puzzle of Theravāda studies is very clear, throughout: as evidenced in this *Handbook*, the field of Theravāda studies has made major advances in talking about and analysing many of the very complex aspects of the relations between Pāli/‘Pāli’ Buddhism and the wider world of beliefs and practices in and with which Pāli is entangled.

---

<sup>7</sup> Here, cosmopolitan scholars = ‘[s]cholars trained in the Euro-American tradition, usually writing primarily for a similarly international audience, in contrast to the “local” scholar, usually writing in a local language for a local audience. “Cosmopolitan” accommodates “local” scholars who have acquired an education abroad or who teach and write outside their home countries.’ *Handbook*, 365, note 1.

If the thesis of this *Handbook* holds—that is, the thesis that Theravāda is civilisational—what are the next steps for the field? What areas of Theravāda ‘civilization’ could be engaged? Even considering this question only from the present day, several possible areas come to mind (some of which are current foci of study and analysis): modern lay Buddhist organisations (e.g., funerary *parahita* organisations of Myanmar) for which monks and traditional conceptions of merit-making hold less to little significance; lay and monastic diasporas throughout the world; certain understudied communities in specific places (e.g., in Indonesia) and their regional and global reach/impact; the global spread of meditation centres, *sīmās*, bodhi trees, and other ritual places and objects; and, the multiple contours (e.g., political, geographic, national, gendered, meditational, aesthetic, cosmological, economic, familial, environmental, material, and temporal) of *sāsana* across present-day Theravāda contexts.

## References

- Carbine, Jason A., and Erik W. Davis, eds. *Sīmās: Foundations of Buddhist Religion*. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2022.
- Kieffer-Pülz, Petra. *Die Sīmā. Vorschriften zur Regelung der buddhistischen Gemeindegrenze in älteren buddhistischen Texten* [The Sīmā: Rules Governing the Buddhist Community Boundaries in Older Buddhist Texts]. Monographien zur indischen Archäologie, Kunst und Philologie, 8. Berlin: Reimer Verlag, 1992.
- Skilling, Peter, Jason A. Carbine, Claudio Cicuzza, and Santi Pakdeekham, eds. *How Theravāda is Theravāda? Exploring Buddhist Identities*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2012.

JASON CARBINE  
*Whitter College*

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.15239/hijbs.06.01.10>