BOOK REVIEWS

How Theravāda Is Theravāda? Exploring Buddhist Identities. By Peter Skilling, Jason A. Carbine, Claudio Cicuzza, and Santi Pakdeekham.
Chaing Mai: Silkworm Books, 2012. Pp. xxxix + 625. ISBN 10: 6162150445; ISBN 13: 978-6162150449.
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"If the Theravādins are not early Sthaviras, who are they?" asked André Bareau in 1955 in his study of the schools of the "Petit Véhicule" (*Hīnayāna*), a work that proved to be both summational and seminal.[1] Bareau identified the "Theravādins of the Mahāvihāra" as both *hīnayāna* and as one of the early schools.[2] He focused on the *Kathāvatthu* as the source of distinctive Theravāda doctrine, a text believed to have been compiled at the Third Council under the patronage of Emperor Asoka in the third century BCE. At the same time Bareau questioned the way in which "the first European scholars who studied it identified [it] ... with the most orthodox school, that which, it is said, remained strictly faithful to the teaching of the Buddha." He also criticised the notion of Theravāda as monolithic: "The usages of the Theravādins vary according to the country and the schools. Their only common and truly characteristic feature seems to be the yellowish-orange of their monastic robe. Their holy language is Pāli."[3] For Bareau's work was not only textual but "was informed by repeated sojourns in ... Sri Lanka, Thailand and Cambodia."[4]

It was only five years before the first publication of Bareau's study that the term *thera-vāda*, literally 'doctrine of the senior monks', had come to be universally accepted as the denotation of the community religion of these countries, becoming its official designation at the World Fellowship of Buddhists in 1950, as Todd LeRoy Perreira observes in this current volume (Chapter 12 "Whence Theravāda? The Modern Genealogy of an Ancient Term", p. 561). This move was the culmination of a different kind of response to the identification, criticised by Bareau, of current Theravāda as a form of *hīnayāna*. It was the term *hīna* 'inferior' to which those contributing to the newly emerging identity of Theravāda objected. It was not the attribution of earliness and authenticity. As Arthid Sheravanichkul (Chapter 11) demonstrates in the case of late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century Thailand, it is from outside, from direct and indirect access to Western and Japanese scholarship, that the understanding of *hīnayāna* and Theravāda's identification with it entered the discourse of those nineteenth- to twentieth-century thinkers and writers who contributed most to the modern formation of an explicit Theravāda identity. (Parallels are visible in the introduction of the terms *hīnayāna*, *mahāyāna* and *bodhicitta* in nineteenth-century Burmese literature.) In spite of these various objections by scholars and proponents, the characterisation of the forms of Buddhism now termed

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1   André Bareau, *The Buddhist Schools of the Small Vehicle*, translated from the French by Sara Boin-Webb, edited by Andrew Skilton (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013 [1955]), p. 275.

2   *Ibid.*, pp. 275–326.

3   *Ibid.*, p. 283.

4   Skilton in *ibid.*, p. xvii.

Theravāda as early, as *hīnayāna* and as monolithic remains pervasive to this day, the best part of a century later. They inform much of the rhetoric and policies of Buddhist hierarchies and even state law in the countries of the region, and the relatively recent formation of such a concept of Theravāda, which I have termed the "static model", is little recognised.[5]

The twelve articles in this volume seek to address the problems noted by Bareau. They address different aspects of Theravada identity, identity formation and even failed attempts at identity formation (the contributions by Blackburn and Sakya), undermining the sense of rigid continuity and monolithic uniformity still often conveyed in literature and political rhetoric. If Todd Perreira's article on the culmination of the creation of "Theravāda" as a denomination is the *omega* – "effectively a monograph" as Peter Skilling rightly points out in his introduction (p. xxvii) – then Rupert Gethin's opening paper (Chapter 1) tackles the *alpha*: what did the term *theravāda* originally mean and how did it develop from referring to the views of the early enlightened monks to being a term for the teachings specifically of the Mahāvihāra lineage? Max Deeg (Chapter 3) examines the parallel terms for *sthavira/thera* in Chinese sources, finding an awareness in them of multiple interpretations of the chosen equivalents, of which *shangzuo* is just one (pp. 131ff). *Shangzuo-bu* as a separate *sthavira/thera-nikāya* occurs in a fourth-century translation telling the story of the early divisions in Buddhist schools, but does not become widespread as a denominational term until the writings of the Tang dynasty (618–907) under the influence of Xuanzang (pp. 145–46). Anne Blackburn (Chapter 6) explores the use of the terms *theravāda*, *theravaṃsa* and *Mahāvihāra* from the early modern period. Sri Lanka's longest-established *nikāya* was imported from Siam in the mid-eighteenth century. Interesting in this case is the lack of concern regarding the historic authenticity of any specific *sāsana*, i.e. there is no attempt to name or see the newly imported lineage as *theravādin*, *theravaṃsa* or a reimportation of the Mahāvihāra lineage (p. 279). For the nineteenth-century monk Hikkaduwē Sumaṅgala seeking to resolve divisions that had emerged in the Sri Lankan Saṅgha, concerns about *upasampadā* and *sīmā* purity were utmost. It is these concerns, not matters of doctrine, that informed his use of the term *theravaṃsa* to mean an ordination lineage going back to the disciples of the Buddha. For him and his later collaborators from across different *nikāyas*, who proposed to King Rāma V of Thailand the formation of a unified ecclesiastical council across Siam, Burma and Sri Lanka, the notion of a lineage deriving from the third council under the patronage of Asoka was important. "Reference made to the purity of 'primitive' Buddhist teachings preserved from the Asokan era drew on Victorian-era scholarly accounts of early Buddhism, which were by then circulating among English-language readers in Laṅkā and Siam, as elsewhere in the Asian Buddhist world" (Blackburn, p. 291).[6] Such moves towards a unified Pali-related Buddhism are also reflected in King Mongkut's invention, with the adoption of printing, of a universal "Ariyaka" Pali script to replace the regional use of Khmer script for Pali, rather than choosing a national, Thai-based script (Phra Anil Sakya, Chapter 10).

While the contributions mentioned above mainly tackle the history and relative presence or absence of the terminology related to *theravāda*, other articles trace aspects of the emerging identities of the forms of Buddhism thus identified within Sri Lanka and mainland Southeast Asia. Lance Cousins examines what is known to have been distinctive about the Abhayagirivihāra monastic network that was for centuries a rival to the Mahāvihāra in Sri Lanka (Chapter 2). Lilian Handlin (Chapter 4) examines visual and inscriptional evidence from temples for the adoption of Theravāda in Pagan from the eleventh century to "suggest that Pagan's early period harbored plural

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5   See e.g. Kate Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism: Continuity, Diversity, and Identity* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), Chapter 9.

6   On the third council in Pali sources, see Y. Karunadasa, *The Theravāda Abhidhamma. Its Inquiry into the Nature of Conditioned Reality* (Hong Kong: Centre of Buddhist Studies, The University of Hong Kong, 2010), Appendix.

Theravādas. Such pluralities long survived before a gradual and never entirely successful homogenisation process blurred their distinctiveness" (p. 167). Jason Carbine explores the *Vinaya*-based reforms of the fifteenth century recorded in the Kalyāṇī inscriptions. These had a huge impact on such matters as the later involvement of kings and the state on monastic life in Burma and elsewhere, the ongoing dominance of Pali and the importance placed on correct *sīmā* consecration (Chapter 5).[7] Peter Skilling (Chapter 7) examines how under the first king of the Bangkok period, "King and court participated in an artistic florescence which saw the production of works inspired by Javanese, Mon, Persian, Chinese, Indian, and Sri Lankan models.... The cultural programme did not cater to Thai, Theravādin, or even Buddhist chauvinism" (p. 332). Nor were the literary works mainly derived from Pali prototypes. The concern was rather with the *sāsanā*, Buddhist teaching, as a whole. Claudio Cicuzza's contribution (Chapter 8) is a translation of the opening chapter of the *Paramatthamaṅgala*, a text that circulates in Pali and Thai vernacular versions, which speaks of the ordination of women as *bhikkhunī*, contrary to the current rhetoric of the impossibility and inappropriateness of such ordination in Thailand (p. 356). Olivier de Bernon challenges the identification of Theravāda with a unique, fixed Pali canon by examining in detail the Vatt Tā Tok inscription of 1857 (Chapter 9). Almost all of the 300 texts listed as donated to the temple are vernacular works in Khmer. There is only one collection of Pali texts included. Yet the entirety of the literature mentioned is referred to as the 'holy Tripiṭaka'. The fact that "for Khmer Buddhists the notion of 'Trai-piṭak', the 'Three Baskets', embraces (Buddhist) religious literature in general, whether it is canonical, extra-canonical, apocryphal, or cosmological (like the *Traibhūmi*)" (p. 379) alerts us to the problem of retrospectively equating the term *tipiṭaka* with the Pali Canon more familiar to us from the Mahāvihāra-derived commentarial tradition dating back to the fifth century. De Bernon's detailed descriptions give some indication of just how different a repertoire of "Theravāda" literature circulated in Cambodia even in the modern period. While inscriptions of this kind are extremely rare, explorations of manuscript collections from other countries in the "Theravāda" world confirm that this picture was reflected elsewhere.

This volume is an important milestone in scholarship that seeks to query the edifice of Theravāda as a monolithic, historically continuous reality. Far from seeing "a stable and cohesive ideology through the traditional period" (citing Steven Collins),[8] Skilling observes, "there is continuity, there is rupture, there is reformation and there is reformulation, none of which avoid or inhibit change and reinvention" (p. 336, conclusion to Chapter 8). Given all the variety, what then becomes intriguing is the coherence that can be observed through *Vinaya*, robe, Pali language and *Abhidhamma* terminology. What are the processes whereby so many have adopted such markers of identity? Skilling makes an interesting observation about the Sangha's modular reproduction through small ordination groups of ten or fewer individuals, creating "a network of modules, self-governing and reproducing units" (p. xiv). He identifies the living results of such modular reproduction, now "most commonly known as Theravāda" as "the descendant communities of the Mahāvihāra tradition" (*ibid.*). Yet I am left wondering if all current lineages could, evidence permitting, really trace their existence to this source. I am mindful of the *nikāya* distinctions that formed in nineteenth-century Bengal under the influence both of reform "Theravāda" traditions from Arakan/Burma and Sri Lanka and of the type of historiography which generated the modern classification of Theravāda as a branch of *hīnayāna*. As I understand it, the lineage seeking to avoid forced re-ordinations

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7   On the development of *sīmā* literature and performance in Burma, see also Nagasena Bhikkhu, "The Monastic Boundary (*Sīmā*) in Burmese Buddhism: Authority, Purity and Validity in Historical and Modern Contexts," Ph.D. thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 2013.

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

identified itself as an "earlier" Mahāsthavira lineage in explicit contrast to Theravāda, yet in matters of *Vinaya*, robe and Pali language soon looked very much like its "Theravāda" compatriots, as can be observed in the *nikāyas* of Bangladesh to this day. Does this offer an alternative model for spread of the dominant identity markers? It is in highlighting the possibility of so many questions, and the potential for so many more, that the significance of this book lies. At the same time, while no final overall answer is explicitly provided to the question raised in the title, each chapter independently does pose and answer important questions in its own right. The entire text is enriched through the wealth of colour illustrations interleaved throughout, sympathetically explained in extensive detail by Peter Skilling at the end (pp. 572–97).

More than Real: A History of the Imagination in South India. By David Shulman.
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More than Real is an arresting book, right from its title which in one stroke asserts the ontic status and indeed superiority of literary imagination, which has long suffered the displeasure of materialist historiography and empiricist history in general. The author strikes a sincere chord when he expresses surprise that a book like this was not written earlier, so obvious and overarching the influence of the mental phenomenon or force that he traces seems to be. In fact while there have been works, including by the current reviewer on specific forms the application of this imagination took in the Sanskrit literary culture of early urban India, none perhaps has taken up imagination in as literal and specific a way as David Shulman sets about doing. He goes on to claim that "imagination was one of the organizing principles" of Indian culture, and tries to demonstrate this via, first, motley texts from the Sanskritic corpus and then threadbare analyses of select Tamil and Telugu texts from the late medieval period.

Categorically, Shulman maintains that "Notwithstanding modern biases and politically driven preconceptions, Sanskrit and the south Indian cultures are intimately interwoven from the beginning of historical time; there is no useful opposition to be drawn here, only a continuous cross-fertilization and a common range of expressive means and modes" (p. x). Nonetheless, in south India between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, "new ideas about the imagination came to serve as indices of wider civilizational change", i.e. the rise of a humanism of which the use of imagination was symptomatic. For regular readers of David Shulman, thus, there is little that is absolutely new in *More than Real*. From of course the elegant, extraordinarily complex and layered prose to the argument of the dawn of an "early modern" sensibility on south Indian shores, which is the subtext to the textual analyses brought together in this book, to some of these analyses themselves – parts of which have appeared before to wide notice (*Marriage of Bhavana and Best*, *Nala in Tenkasi*, *Manu-caritramu*) – *More than Real* is quintessentially Shulman even while it carries a sense of déjà vu about it.

There is something compelling about a book that purports to be the history of a mental faculty as nebulous as imagination in a civilization as intellectually prodigious as the Indian. But is *More than Real* a work of history? And how does it define the faculty or realm it so passionately and with massive erudition identifies and dissects across varied moments in time? The two questions may be related.