

Paradigm Shifts in Buddhist Scholarship

Jack Chia, Ph.D. candidate in history, and
Courtney Work, Ph.D. anthropology



Front row (left to right): Christian Lammerts, Jack Chia, Nicola Tannenbaum, Erick White, and Susan Darlington. Back row (left to right): Justin McDaniel, Courtney Work, Charles Hallisey, Anne Blackburn, and Erik Davis.

On the first spring-like weekend in April 2014, a collection of scholars whose work engages South and Southeast Asian Buddhism convened at Cornell's Kahin Center for Advanced Research on Southeast Asia for a day-long workshop, "Rethinking Southeast Asian and Southern Buddhism." The workshop provided an opportunity to discuss recent shifts in the scholarly treatment of Buddhism in these regions. The workshop was the brainchild of then Cornell anthropology Ph.D. candidate, now Dr. Erick White, whose extensive study of Buddhism and spirit mediums in Thailand pushed up against the definitional boundaries of religion in general and especially of Southeast Asian Buddhism. His call for participants proposed that we engage in wide-ranging and free-flowing discussion about the scholarly trends currently affecting Buddhist scholarship and the study of religion and suggested we address the changing landscape of Buddhist studies in Southeast Asia. The idea was to see just how far those boundaries stretch and what tears and fissures may result. Our exciting discussion and dialogue raised thought provoking questions, many of which remained unresolved at the end of the workshop. Nevertheless, it was a fruitful scholarly conversation that hopefully will inspire new ways to rethink Southeast Asian and Southern Buddhism.

Workshop participants, senior and junior scholars, spanned the fields of Anthropology, History, and Religious Studies; the range of expertise, interests, and concerns made for productive discussions and thought-provoking interventions. Before the workshop, each participant was asked to prepare and circulate a brief suggestive and polemical position paper that critically interrogated an established concept, model, frame, or argument that has had an enduring influence in the study of SEA Buddhism. These became the gateway through which we entered the diversity of regional, national, and sectarian traditions of Buddhism represented at the workshop.

Our day-long workshop was divided into four segments. In the first morning session, each participant briefly responded to the position paper of one other participant. This semi-formal exercise formed the ground from which our conversation grew. The papers covered a broad range of concerns and topics: Jack Chia's paper grappled with our need to expand the study of Southeast Asian Buddhism beyond the mainland concerns of Pāli-language liturgy and so-called "animism" to include Chinese and Southeast Asian language liturgies and the practices that accompany them in Maritime Southeast Asia. Susan Darlington asked us to consider the implications of declining concerns with engaged Buddhism in Thailand and its relationship to the problems of climate change facing Thailand and the rest of the world. Erik Davis called our attention to the academic terms we use, own, and exercise authority over. With this call, he also highlighted the importance of the words of local practitioners who have their own lexical agendas, often at odds with those of academics.

Charles Hallisey on the other hand, follows Foucault to suggest that thought drives action and that the objects of thought can give rise to intentional social movements. With this insight, he directs us toward the "meta meta" implications of our workshop, pushing us to think beyond complexifying existing models and to create new pictures through which we can think afresh of what is Southeast Asian Buddhism. Christian Lammerts suggested that we consider previously ignored Pāli and vernacular legal texts. Lammerts attends to Burmese-Pāli vernacular legal manuscripts. In this way, he reconciles Buddhist disciplines and practices with the exercise of law, economics, and medicine. Justin McDaniel discussed the need to consider the Chinese in Southeast Asia by focusing on a variety of related aesthetic architectural styles and a series of deities and bodhisattvas, as "Chinese." Nicola Tannenbaum argued that Buddhism in Southeast Asia is better understood in terms of indigenous politico-religious practices that transformed and localized what we consider Buddhism. She finds commonalities between upland and lowland practices in Southeast Asia that eradicate any suggestion of a normative Southeast Asian Buddhist perspective. Erick White grappled with the problem of "syncretism," a term that he suggests reflects a lack of intellectual self-reflexivity among scholars regarding their implicit assumptions about socio-cultural reproduction within religious forma-

tions. Courtney Work suggested that we consider the theoretical implications of Buddhist phenomenological texts as more than objects of study and to use them as a theoretical lens through which to discuss and analyze social processes and practices in Southeast Asia.

Participants then each put forward an issue or topic of interest for discussion. These included: localization, globalization, and pluralization; identity, gender, and power; syncretism, hybridization, and "animism." Our list made visible the ways that the terms we use can engender a certain "talking past each other" in academic circles. The words become more like place holders that allow us to jump over what they are meant to describe. Do the categories exist before we name them or do we use them as analytic containers? Can we do without them? Calls were made for terms we should excise and for those that we can't do without. For instance, "religion," many of us thought we could do without. Lammerts noted, however, that the term "Buddhism" is crucial for his research and Theravāda, Hallisey claimed, must remain.

After lunch, we talked about specific moments in time through which we can refocus, and thus see afresh, Buddhism in Southeast Asia. These moments included the 2004 tsunami, Buddhadasa's death in 1993, the 1965 military coup in Indonesia and the establishment of the New Order, the WWII Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia, the translation of Pāli texts into Sinhala, the October 1958 coup of Sarit Thanarat in Thailand, the earth goddess Naing Tharam's dramatic rescue of the Buddha from Mara, the American War in Vietnam, the Indian revival of Cambodian practices and cultures during the reign of King Ang Duong, and the trade in pepper and cinnamon across the Indian Ocean during the 12th century. Someone pointed out that many of our examples were either economic or political moments in history, suggesting once again that the term "religion" may in fact be expendable.

It was noted that "religion" is an aggregated category. It also gives rise to artistic cultural industries that create modern middle-class Buddhist sensibilities and imaginaries of justice that open themselves to exceed their contextualized clusters and invoke what Foucault calls a history of thought and ideas. So, in a moment when "religion" presented itself to be little more than a veneer over state-sponsored activities, it also slipped into that place where we operate beyond the categories of religion, where we desire, where we attend to justice and grief through exploration and thought. There may be something beyond "religion" for which we have no term.

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