

# ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM

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*Edited by Stephen C. Berkwitz and Ashley Thompson*

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## INTRODUCTION

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*Stephen C. Berkwitz and Ashley Thompson*

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# INTRODUCTION

*Stephen C. Berkwitz and Ashley Thompson*

## Introduction

We are at a moment in time when the appropriateness of the term *Theravāda* for many contexts in which it is regularly used is under fire, when the distortions its very usage has created are being scrutinized. Our moment also affords glimpses into how such distortions and the apprehension of these as such can be integral to the topic at hand—a long-evolving dynamic, discursive, construction always already heterogeneous to “itself.” Theravāda Buddhism is not one thing, nor is it an accumulation of different but related things. Nor is it simply nothing. But its ontological status is anything but given. To roughly cite Pāli scholar Charles Hallisey with reference to what the anthropologist James Clifford said about “culture”: Theravāda Buddhism is a deeply compromised category that we have not yet learned to do without (cf. Clifford 1988: 10). As such, in this Introduction, we do not attempt to explain or define what Theravāda really is. This *Handbook* provides instead a window into the current state of affairs in the study of Theravāda Buddhism. In providing a wide range of understandings of what comprises Theravāda at a given place and time and how, it also aims to trigger thought on the future of the field.

There is an unresolvable tension between, on one hand, the nominalist dimensions of the issue (how we define what is worthy of consideration when we study Theravāda Buddhism) and, on the other hand, its realist dimensions (the diversity found among the traditions and communities brought together with the name “Theravāda”). In editing this volume, we have struggled to be both nominalist and realist at once and have kept a wary eye on the inevitable inadequacy of the former in relation to the latter. This scholarly context is in some ways analogous to that of Buddhists across history in South and Southeast Asian communities, where vastly different visions and experiences of Theravāda can share the premise that Theravāda has certain features that are discernible and authoritative, worthy of universal recognition, beyond any individual iteration—even if they do not necessarily share in the so-defined same features themselves. In a scholarly distillation of this shared premise, Theravāda can be said to ground itself in a heritage traced to Gotama Buddha and to an interpretation of his legacy shaped by the teachers who created the commentaries on the *Tipiṭaka*, the “Three Baskets” comprising the Pāli canon. What features become worthy of focus against this backdrop is infinitely variable, as are the means by which such focus is articulated. There is no single Theravāda tradition, and no defined canon of salient traits by which any Theravāda worthy of the name can be identified.

There are rather multiple visions about which forms of practice and thought are derived from the Buddha and his earliest disciples. Some forms of Theravāda, moreover, are not wedded to the term itself and may instead define themselves in other ways, for example, through the prisms of national citizenship, ethnolinguistic identity, or particular types of meditation. In such contexts, the primacy of the shared frame can be lesser, indeed wholly subsumed, by other concerns.

### The very idea of Theravāda

In this section, we aim to lay out a few basic issues to assist nonspecialists in using this volume. What we say here is developed with greater nuance and precision in the *Handbook's* individual chapters, which themselves are by and large research-led and, as such, meant also to address advanced students and colleagues in the Buddhist Studies field as well as the other disciplinary fields in which they engage. 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.

The use of the Pāli language distinguishes what will become known as the Theravāda from other early schools that coalesced around a Sanskrit canon. The Pāli canon also forms a relatively “closed” canon of texts, compared with other Buddhist schools; this relative closure is an effect of the notion that the teachings should comprise, in the main, those the Buddha preached while he was alive in the world. There is no allowance, in other words, for an expansive canon of texts that were “found” or “revealed” in subsequent centuries by a Buddha who is thought to exist in a heavenly realm and may continue to disseminate teachings by revelation, as in many Mahāyāna forms of the religion. Core to the Theravāda tradition(s) is nonetheless plurivocality. At no place and time, it would seem, has Pāli been used to the exclusion of other languages. Theravāda can, in fact, be characterized by its dizzying array of bilingual forms. Crucially, while the presence of Pāli can be taken, be it retrospectively, to indicate the presence of Theravāda, the opposite does not hold; that is, Theravāda can have a presence in the absence of Pāli language usage per se.

As noted earlier, contemporary scholars have raised serious questions about the salience of the term *Theravāda*. It has been pointed out that the term was of only limited use in Pāli Buddhist texts in the premodern period and that it was not part of the premodern self-conscious identity of Buddhists in South and Southeast Asia (Skilling 2009: 63). In other words, those who considered themselves to be devotees of the Buddha in contexts where Pāli was a language of reference would, generally speaking, not have thought of themselves as belonging to a Theravāda school or community. When the term does appear in premodern Pāli texts—mainly

commentarial (*aṭṭhakathā*) or historical (*vaṃsa*) literature, it does so infrequently and usually refers to a tradition of interpretation of the canonical texts developed by Elder Monks (*thera*) who counted themselves within the lineage of the original 500 *arahants* (beings made worthy by their liberation from the fetters of the world) who codified and recorded the Buddha's teachings at a legendary First Council shortly after the Buddha's demise (Gethin 2012: 14, 55). Current consensus among scholarly specialists is that the term *Theravāda* was not the primary label for Buddhists who adhered to Pāli traditions of text and practice before the modern period.

Nevertheless, the idea of Theravāda grew in relevance and currency in the twentieth century. Its usage expanded from a largely monastic tradition of textual interpretation associated with Pāli canonical and commentarial texts into a broad school of practice comprising monastics and laypersons who began to identify themselves with this specific term. This transformation in terminology was helped along by a new discourse that Western monks and scholars promoted as the label for a coherent school of Buddhism found primarily in South and Southeast Asia and that would replace the pejorative "Hīnayāna" (lesser vehicle) label derived from Mahāyāna polemics (Perreira 2012: 460–461). The reification of the construct as a "tradition" on the order of a school or lineage with singularly uninterrupted continuity is itself a modern phenomenon with links rather than roots in an enduring premodern discourse of fidelity to the very words of the Buddha.

While the history of the term as outlined by Perreira and others does point to the relative recentness of the usage of *Theravāda* to designate a type of Buddhism, we are hesitant to label it as a mere anachronism. Pāli and associated vernacular texts commonly speak of *theras* as religious authorities, and there are in any case few efforts in the premodern period to categorize broad Buddhist traditions that could encompass laypersons as well as different orders of monastics, esoteric practices as well as public liturgies, merit-making activities as well as political strategies, women and girls as well as men and boys, or all sorts of artistic representation. This does not, however, mean that the Pāli reference did not both assume and provide a certain coherence among practitioners, lay and monastic. In awaiting the advent of a more perfect approach, and in the hopes that this volume will contribute to its coming, we see "Theravāda" to retain its utility as a category that incorporates a diverse mix of texts, practices, objects, and groups found mainly across South and Southeast Asia, and we note that the term has become commonplace and is regularly invoked by "Theravāda Buddhists" themselves in the modern period (Skilling 2012: xxix–xxx). Searching for a different term from premodern traditions to function in the same sense that the modern *Theravāda* does would, in any case, be a futile exercise itself premised on narrow understandings of language, translation, and scholarship bereft of historicity.

There are several other key terms that help to ground understandings of Theravāda. The Pāli term *sāsana*, often translated as "dispensation," "tradition," and even "religion," figures prominently in the self-definition of what is now frequently called Theravāda Buddhism. Described by Steven Collins (1998: 348) as "an historically instantiated and institutionalized body of knowledge" that was discovered by a Buddha and transmitted by his monastic disciples, the *sāsana* serves as the emic concept that approximates the idea of the Buddhist religion. Understood to consist of the teachings (*dhamma*) and the institutions founded by the Buddha, the *sāsana* is attributed with the authority of its enlightened originator, and it functions as the means by which people in later eras may encounter that which the Buddha allegedly established to assist others in their efforts to reduce suffering, enhance well-being, and ultimately obtain liberation (*nirvana*). It includes doctrinal teachings, as well as the rules and customs associated with the Buddhist *saṅgha*, or monastic community as elaborated in the *Vinaya*. The *sāsana* is identifiable with the legacy of the Buddha that was taken to have been bestowed directly by him to his followers, and importantly, the *sāsana* is also understood to be subject to historical forces

and diminution over time. The Buddhist embrace of impermanence as an irrefutable fact of conditional existence has led the tradition to affirm that even the Buddha's *sāsana* is subject to decay and disappearance. In view of this idea, and despite the widespread acceptance of it, Theravāda Buddhists often work to preserve the *sāsana* in what they nominally hold to be its earliest and most authentic form (Crosby 2014: 9).

One of the primary aspects of the *sāsana* in Theravāda is the Pāli canon, the authoritative collection of texts attributed to the Buddha's very words and preserved in the Pāli language for the express purpose of transmission. Theravāda Buddhists have traditionally held that Pāli was the language spoken by the Buddha, although linguists and scholars generally maintain that as a Middle Indo-Aryan language, Pāli was at best only related to the language in which the Buddha actually spoke. In fact, various historical circumstances led to the preservation in Pāli of the canonical Three Baskets (*Tipiṭaka*) of texts. Divided into categories of monastic rules (*Vinaya*), discursive teachings (*Sutta*), and metaphysical analysis of experience (*Abhidhamma*), the Pāli canon represents the most authoritative version of the Buddha's teachings. Other non-Theravāda Buddhist communities recognize different canonical collections of texts preserved in Sanskrit, Tibetan, or other languages. Learned sectors of the tradition have embraced, and ultimately underpinned, a popular embrace of a historicist and exclusivist idea of canon. Although identified with the Buddha's own words, the collection of texts that is now the canon was circumscribed in the early centuries of the Common Era by a group of Sri Lankan monks who sought to define and legitimate their monastic community against other competitors (Collins 1990: 101–102). This was the community of the Mahāvihāra, which would come to dominate the island of Sri Lanka and subsequently impact Pāli Buddhist practice in Southeast Asia in a substantial manner. The recurrent reference to Sri Lanka as the cradle of Theravāda Buddhism in many Southeast Asian contexts is inseparable from the Mahāvihāra construction as it has been reiterated over time. Nevertheless, different ethnolinguistic communities that recognize Pāli as authoritative will use different vernacular languages (e.g., Sinhala, Burmese, Thai, Lao, and Khmer) while also using Pāli in liturgical and some textual and ritual contexts. Actual relations to Sri Lanka differed significantly in different geo-historical contexts such that Theravāda can be said in many ways to have developed through networks of exchange in multiple locales in parallel rather than through dissemination from a center—be that center located in the Buddha before the Common Era or in Sri Lanka at its start.

There are additional genres of Pāli texts that have been otherwise important for the development of this form of Buddhism. Specifically, the composition of commentarial texts (*aṭṭhakathā*) and sub-commentaries (*ṭīkā*) in the Pāli language has helped establish a textual tradition that was for many centuries almost synonymous with the idea of the “Theravāda” as a body of authoritative opinion or decrees that came down from senior monks (Gethin 2012: 29). In particular, commentaries such as the famed fifth-century scholar-monk Buddhaghosa's *Samantapāsādikā* outline the foundation of a coherent monastic lineage that connects the earliest disciples of the Buddha with later generations of monks in the Mahāvihāra community. Within this particular narrative of origins, it is said that Venerable Mahinda, an Elder Monk who traveled to Sri Lanka in order to transmit the *sāsana* there, had “learnt the complete Tradition of the Elders [*theravādaṃ*] consisting of the works of the Three Piṭakas together with their commentaries handed down at the two Convocations” (Jayawickrama 1986: 46). It is important to note how this account highlights the commentaries along with the canonical texts as comprising the *theravāda*, which in this early, premodern sense refers to the Pāli textual tradition. In this sense, the *aṭṭhakathā* works effectively functioned, in Maria Heim's words, as a continuation of the transmission and unfolding of the Buddha's words from the First Council onwards (Heim 2018: 220).

At the same time, Theravāda's debt to Pāli literature is evidenced in different ways among its various adherents in South and Southeast Asia. While all Theravāda groups subscribe to the Pāli *Tipiṭaka* as an authoritative collection of canonical texts derived from the Buddha's teachings, different communities place different degrees of emphasis on different texts. For instance, *Abhidhamma* texts assume proportionately more importance in formal study in modern Burma than in its mainland neighbors today. Likewise, Burmese Buddhists use the *aṭṭhakathā* commentaries for interpreting the canon more systematically and intensively than their neighbors. Such distinctions were brought into relief in the wake of nineteenth- and twentieth-century religious reforms in Thailand (Crosby 2014: 85). Many Theravāda Buddhists have also composed and utilized handbooks and summaries (sometimes in Pāli) that give shorthand access to the canonical and commentarial literature. Arguably, the most influential and well known of such paracanonical texts is Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* (Path of Purification), a fifth-century compendium of teachings abstracted from canonical texts on the development of morality (*sīla*), meditation (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*). The diversity of Theravāda literature is dramatically increased by the long-standing composition of Buddhist texts in literary vernaculars such as Sinhala, Burmese, Shan, Mon, Thai, Lao, and Khmer. Crucially, these works reached diverse audiences within lay and monastic milieux. Ranging from innovative compositions of the Buddha's life story to narrative inventions of the origins and lives of legendary images and relics to monastic ceremonial guides and illustrated meditation manuals, they bear witness to elite scholarly, specialist practitioner, and popular culture evolving in dialogue over time.

In conjunction with written texts, both canonical and noncanonical, Pāli and vernacular, Theravāda has also been defined and transmitted by other forms of material culture across South and Southeast Asia. What we have been calling textual traditions are in fact integral to material culture. These include writing on stone, metal, terracotta, palm leaves, and bark, as well as on paper. In first millennia mainland Southeast Asia, stone inscriptions predominantly bore Pāli liturgical citations, while the second millennia brought a predominance of vernacular and Pāli compositions recording merit-making good works such as the donation of a Buddha image to a temple or more extensive architectural foundations; these were generally associated with eulogies of their (often royal) founders. Such historical records could include accounts of legendary feats of Buddhist figures or socioeconomic organizations centered on temple foundations. Inscriptions from ancient Sri Lanka were also often tied to donative acts, although they increasingly contained eulogistic praise for kings around the turn of the second millennium. The Sri Lankan inscriptions differed from those in Southeast Asia by relying mostly on Sinhala writing, along with a few Sanskrit works, while largely abstaining from the use of Pāli in the island's epigraphy.

Artistic representation of Gotama Buddha, although depicted with stylistic and iconographic variation over space and time, is more or less recognizable to Theravāda Buddhists across the board, serving to convey and embody group cohesion on micro and macro scales in both synchronic and diachronic terms. At the same time, a given Buddha image often carried distinctly local meaning, indiscernible to the uninformed naked eye. The widespread practice in modern Cambodia, for example, of venerating specific Buddha statues not as Buddhas per se but as embodiments of specific male or female historical or legendary figures grew no doubt in relation to ancient Angkorian practices by which the elite were posthumously assimilated with Hindu or Buddhist divinities embodied in statues. Artistic representations of narratives at the core of Theravādin beliefs—the *jātaka* tales illustrating the Buddha's achievement of ethical perfections over past lives, along with the story of Siddhattha Gotama's life and death—provide another, related mode of communication of history, ethics, and ritual practice key to constituting knowledge of Theravāda and experience of Theravādin community. Here, too, vernacular styles,

thematic proclivities, strategies of placement and composition, and use of media (stone, wood, brick or stucco sculpture, paint, print) differ significantly over space, time, and given purpose comprise a dynamic, heterogeneous Theravāda. Narrative representations can function in a like manner to the localized Buddha statues noted above, where telltale features—locally styled architecture, the features of a historical king’s face, an iconic local temple setting, a landscape, or dress characteristic of home—set the Buddha’s life story in the here and now.

Likewise, characteristic architectural forms simultaneously reflect and provide cohesion to the Theravādin community as a whole and to specific communities seen up against others. The funerary monument—a *stūpa*, or a *cetiya* as it has been widely known under its Pāli designations in Southeast Asian usage, and commonly as a *stūpa* or a *dāgāba* in Sri Lanka—is literally and figuratively the most outstanding of these. The singularity of the form, a more or less closed, more or less bulbous symbolic mountain-womb widely understood to comprise an abstract form of the Buddha is never lost in its many iterations over Sri Lankan and mainland Southeast Asian time and space. Yet each and every *stūpa* will have its story of who built it when and for whose relics—the Buddha’s and/or others’ to be assimilated with those of the Buddha in his abstract form. In some places and times, that abstract form is demonstrably venerated as the Buddha; in others, such veneration is reserved for the statue alone.

*Sīmā*, or boundary markers are another potent example of dynamic developments of a singular tradition. “One of the prior conditions for the existence and continuance of the Buddhist community is a boundary (*sīmā*) which defines the space within which all members of a single local community have to assemble as a complete Saṅgha ... at a place appointed for ecclesiastical acts” (Kieffer-Pülz 1997: 141). Rules regulating *sīmā* were laid out in the *Vinaya*; these were repeatedly subject to review, explanation, modification, and extension over well more than a millennium in the commentarial and sub-commentarial literature. The interpretive process developed also in material terms on the ground. Whereas in Sri Lanka, the *sīmā* are ritually determined boundaries that can be represented by stone markers buried in the ground or designated topographical elements, from the sixth and seventh centuries in areas of mainland Southeast Asia, the *sīmā* became systematically figured in sculpted stones planted to be seen aboveground, over buried markers. Today such usage in Theravādin Southeast Asia is nearly universal and sculpted *sīmā* stones comprise an important element of the region’s archaeological, art historical, political, and ethnographic record. Yet *where* exactly they are used and what they can mean differs from one time or one locale to another; in Southeast Asia, such issues have also been the subject of extended textual consideration and regulation, from epigraphic declarations to consecration manuals to court decisions.

In many contexts, Theravāda is best known by its practitioners not by way of authoritative texts but, rather, by way of material culture and associated practices. Acknowledgment of the authority of the text as a general category, as of the Pāli canon broadly conceived, nonetheless irrevocably inflects the forms and meanings of objects-in-practice; and the distinction the present discussion relies on, between text and nontext, does not always maintain insofar as the *dhamma* or teachings is objectified, embodied in objects—books, statues, relics—and venerated as such. Notable also is the fact that artistic styles also traveled by way of Buddhist objects such that something more than “Buddhism” taken to mean doctrinal tenets or the story of the Buddha’s life was also exchanged in the adoption here or there of certain forms. In short, this material culture of the *dhamma* is inseparable from the immaterial in myriad ways, such that the knowledge of Theravāda had by Theravādins can pass virtually unnoticed, like perfume in the air. That is, the “practitioners” to whom we refer include people evolving in Theravāda milieu and contributing to them, although not always intentionally so. In these loose Bourdieusian terms, Theravāda names a *habitus*. The material evidence for Theravāda in Southeast Asia indeed

attests to a longstanding presence of monastics ordained in the Pāli traditions of the Elder Monks (*theras*) far earlier than many Pāli textual scholars oriented towards Sri Lankan historical and literary phenomena would have imagined. Theravāda became what it is also in areas, people, practices, and things at a great distance from the origins they nonetheless imagined.

## Theravāda Civilizations

The idea of this *Handbook* arose out of conversations that took place under the umbrella of the Theravāda Civilizations Project, which originated in 2011 under the direction of Juliane Schober and the late Steven Collins with support from the Luce Foundation. This project enabled the collaborative, interdisciplinary work of a group of scholars to reimagine, refine, and encourage new scholarship on Theravāda Buddhism. The work was developed through conferences, workshops for doctoral and post-doctoral researchers, and the publication of edited collections. Collective publications thus far include *Theravāda Buddhist Encounters with Modernity* (Routledge 2018), and a second volume in press, also with Routledge, on the life of the Buddha. The project also led to the development of the Theravāda Studies Group, which comprises a larger, interdisciplinary group of scholars and is affiliated with the Association for Asian Studies. With contributions from many of the Theravāda Civilizations group members, including we two editors, the present *Handbook* is in many ways another product of the original Luce-funded initiative.

In resonance with the landmark volume *How Theravāda Is Theravāda?* (Skilling 2012), the Theravāda Civilizations group sought to historicize and contextualize what is meant by “Theravāda” by engaging in exchanges explicitly structured to expand disciplinary, period, and area-based knowledge of different iterations of Theravāda. The exchanges were meant at once to enable further accumulation of knowledge within discrete areas of expertise and, in the name of “Theravāda,” to break down barriers between the so-defined bodies of knowledge. The latter was consistently the more challenging of our tasks. Marveling at our own incessant production of arrays of shared yet different things—ways of burying the dead, words for “saints,” modes of regulating sexuality—came far more easily than considering the import of a lofty word like *civilization*. The latter process involved wrestling with the question of Theravāda’s alleged coherence rather than, or in addition to building exchanges on an unacknowledged assumption that it does cohere. We were made periodically aware that the exciting exchanges by which we could cover virtually all geographic and disciplinary grounds flirted with reifying Theravāda as a lineage, school, movement, or some other historical entity and, as such, ran the risk of participating in configurations of power that make authoritative pronouncements on Theravāda’s identity and legitimacy. Our collective consciousness of the hegemonic pretensions and violent potentiality of such power structures haunting not only Theravāda but also our endeavors in its regard would likewise periodically rise to the surface.

From this perspective, trying to distinguish whether Theravāda is a singular phenomenon or a diverse set of multiples does not address the more fundamental questions of who can decide what counts for Theravāda and why. Nor does it examine how coherence in tradition and identity is constructed and what makes certain features worthy of study and certain arguments for coherence more compelling than others. Therefore, while scholars may continue to identify new and relatively unexplored features of Theravāda Buddhism that are ripe for study, the challenge of avoiding essentializing pronouncements over what Theravāda is or is not, independently and in place of how practitioners themselves have dealt with these issues, remains salient for us. The challenge lies in recognizing that any meaningful conceptualization of “Theravāda Buddhism” as both a theoretical object and an analytical category must come to



terms with the capaciousness, complexity, and even outright contradiction that appears within this historical phenomenon that has proceeded from the human engagement with the idea and reality of the Buddha's awakening and teaching (cf. Ahmed 2016: 6).

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* functions. Family and social relationships 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.”

### Organization of the handbook

The *Handbook* is organized around thematic rather than geographical or chronological considerations. We made this editorial choice as a means of emphasizing the nominalist dimensions of our task, that is, of drawing out what we deem to be important features of Theravāda Buddhism that crossnational and period boundaries and other divides such as urban/rural and monastic/lay. Specializations—geographic, period, and/or disciplinary—nonetheless underpin individual contributions and, as such, tend to make the realist dimensions of the collective work felt. We hope that the themes will generate further discussion, including on how this basic editorial choice inflects understandings of Theravāda and on what other key themes we have for one reason or another left out. On this note, we can flag the omission of any chapter singularly devoted to questions of violence in Theravāda Buddhism. While issues of gender and race are addressed within specific contexts, they are not treated as categories in themselves or with sustained consideration of violence in their regard. And we have not included work on Theravāda communities outside of Asia. These themes do however pervade the volume. We have sought to highlight them instead through the index.

We have organized the contributions into four parts under broad headings that serve to group the diverse aspects of Theravāda into related areas of study. Part I, titled “Ideas/Ideals,” serves to set the stage with chapters investigating notions used to collectively define what Theravāda is, how it has been organized, and how it has moved through time. Sven Bretfeld's chapter explores the very idea of “Theravāda” by relating this term to a long history of textual efforts to identify the authentic transmission of the Buddha's *sāsana* with the Mahāvihāra monastic lineage in Sri Lanka. By examining several key Pāli and Sinhala premodern texts, Bretfeld's chapter shows how an authoritative Theravāda tradition was fashioned out of a diversity of other Buddhist “sects.” Next, Alastair Gornall takes up the subject of “Pāli” as a defining feature of Theravāda. Eschewing the common gesture of attributing its place and power to vague notions of the hegemonic sacred, Gornall proposes a threefold analytical framework for better understanding the complexity of the language's role in constituting what Steven Collins has called the “Pāli imaginaire.” Examining how the authority of the language emerges as that performatively constituted by claims and counterclaims in its own regard,

Gornall shows the dynamism of the imaginaire evolving over time. Next, Anne Blackburn's chapter on "Circulations" scrutinizes how Theravāda traditions moved about in what she calls the "Pāli world," or the linked spaces in which Pāli language and texts retained influence. Using the premodern polity of Sukhothai as her case study, Blackburn proposes that we can learn from looking at the transmission of specific elements such as theories of Buddhist sovereignty, styles of Buddhist devotional practice, and cosmological understandings across specific locales as integral to circulatory processes that linked diverse communities. Patrice Ladwig's chapter on "Statecraft" examines key dimensions of traditional conceptions of kingship embraced by Theravāda communities, before moving on to consider these in relation to political practices on the ground in mainland Southeast Asian settings. These systems of political organization and statecraft are ultimately then shown to inform modern forms of governance with concerns for political legitimation and national integration. The chapter on "Reform," co-written by Anne Hansen and Anthony Lovenheim Irwin, looks at how modern Theravāda communities have adopted older themes of purifying and reinvigorating what is deemed to be the authentic Buddhist tradition. Although based on older models, modern reformist movements are shown to have distinctive features. The authors describe mid-twentieth-century movements that might be labeled "decolonizing" before the popularization of the name in epistemological terms, in which monastics and Buddhist politicians embraced local yet cosmopolitan and distinctly non-Western modes of knowledge construction. The last chapter in Part I is Nirmala Salgado's chapter on "Tradition," in which she analyzes the debates over what constitutes "Theravāda" that took place amidst efforts to reestablish the *bhikkhunī* lineage of Buddhist nuns in modern and contemporary Sri Lanka and in dialogue with related initiatives in Thailand and Burma. These debates demonstrate how the practices and lineages that constitute Theravāda traditions are not self-evident but are rather formed through contestation.

Part II, titled "Practices/Persons," aims to highlight different modes of embodiment of Theravāda. That this section is the largest of the volume is indicative of a current scholarly focus on everyday Buddhist life. Juliane Schober's chapter on "Merit" examines social practices of giving in Burma. Her chapter shows that practices of generosity (*dāna*) have relevance not only for understanding Theravāda systems of obtaining rewards for doing good deeds but also occupy an important place in ritual economies, political governance, and institution-building processes. Next, Pyi Phyo Kyaw and Kate Crosby discuss Theravāda practices of "Meditation." After outlining foundational meditation practices and goals of self-transformation as articulated in Pāli texts, the authors home in on techniques elaborated in *Abhidhamma* texts in particular and in pre-reform methods still in active use in multiple Theravāda contexts. Further consideration is given to two living Burmese traditions. Next, Christoph Emmrich offers a theoretical examination of the role of "Repetition" in Theravāda practice. The repetition of select utterances and phrases comprises aspects of performance that aesthetically enable the coming into being of what is said, assist with memorization, facilitate doctrinal explanation in both pedagogical and experiential manners, and determine karmic results. Grégory Kourilsky's chapter on "Filial Piety" explores a paradox at the heart of Theravāda societies: while remarkable value is placed on devotion towards one's parents in explicitly Buddhist terms, the notion of filial piety is not highlighted in the authoritative texts of the Mahāvihāra and indeed appears to run counter to both the central ethic of *karma* and the foundational act of renunciation of family ties performed by the Buddha and monastics in his wake. The chapter on "Laity" by Asanga Tilakaratne debunks categorical distinctions frequently cited in scholarly literature between "nibbanic" and "kam-matic" Buddhism when these convey the reductive notion that monastics are singularly oriented to obtaining *nirvana* and the laity to improving their destinies in future lives by performing good works. He begins by recalling how the early Pāli texts describe the roles of Buddhist laypersons

chiefly as donors that support the Buddhist *saṅgha*, to then expand upon this traditional trope of the layperson in discussing how in more modern times, the Buddhist laity of Sri Lanka and Burma have become active in meditation, the study of *dhamma* texts, and practices linked with social justice. Next, Thomas Borchert discusses “Discipline” as practiced and negotiated both within and beyond the Pāli *Vinaya*. Focusing on examples from Thailand and Sipsongpannā in southwestern China, Borchert explores how discipline and training are accessed through formal and informal sources in an effort to make monks who behave and look in appropriate ways. The final chapter of this section concerns “Funerals,” wherein Katherine Bowie examines how this important Theravāda life-cycle ritual has changed over time in different regions of Thailand. We learn that funerary practices perform diverse cultural work, expressing social divisions and local understandings of death that contribute to an understanding of the complex politico-religious histories of Theravāda lands.

Part III, “Texts/Teachings,” is focused on key genres and features of Theravāda texts. Here, too, diversity is forefronted, as we glimpse the extent to which Theravāda is *not* limited to a singular text or to a discrete group of texts. Peter Skilling provides a comprehensive overview of the notion of “Canons” in the lineage of the *theras*, or Elder Monks, who are attributed with authority over the traditions and texts of Theravāda Buddhism. His chapter outlines the different notions, materials, and collections of canonical texts that appear in the Theravāda, emphasizing change over time, with different forms and cultural valences appearing in different settings. Rupert Gethin then analyzes the Theravāda *Abhidhamma*, the third basket of canonical texts which comes to be understood as the ultimate expression of the Buddha’s teaching, in relation to the *Abhidhamma* thought associated with the ancient Sarvāstivāda school from northern India. This comparison yields telling similarities and differences found between these two Buddhist versions of systematic thought on physical and mental phenomena. The chapter on “Vamsa” by Stephen Berkwitz examines this important genre of historical writing. Focused on recalling the legendary histories of how the Buddha, relics, and the *sāsana*, traveled to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, his contribution argues that these texts were instrumental in defining notions of Theravāda and authenticating its lineages of transmission to lands outside of India. Next, in another chapter on “Merit,” Rita Langer discusses how certain exegetical texts served to describe how merit is made and to categorize the different actions for making merit. Her focus on the textual sources for understanding merit is complemented by attention to how contemporary Sri Lankan Buddhists understand merit-making practices. The last chapter in Part III deals with the phenomenon of “bilingualism” in Theravāda writing. Trent Walker offers a close analysis of Theravāda “bitexts,” works that stitch together portions of Pāli or other Indic prestige language texts and local vernaculars. The chapter details how Theravāda Buddhists have developed critical systems for analyzing, transmitting, and performing texts which are virtually unique in Buddhist worlds.

Part IV, titled “Images/Imaginations,” groups together chapters addressing processes—material, ritual, social, and textual—by which diverse Theravāda identities are imagined. Samerchai Poolsuwan discusses “Visual Narratives” in artistic portrayals of the Buddha’s life story in the Pagan area of upper Burma. Poolsuwan probes the materials for what they convey of Southeast Asia’s “medieval Theravāda,” a term he uses to designate a matrix of inter-related local varieties of Pāli-based Buddhism both preceding twelfth-century Sri Lankan reforms and resisting these up until at least the fourteenth century. Next, Ashley Thompson explores the work of “Icons,” bolstered as it is by narrative depictions in Theravāda contexts. The chapter 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. Next, in a

chapter titled “Affect,” Chairat Polmuk explores the sensorial experiences that are produced in ritual encounters with relics and in visually mediated forms in contemporary film. Through the lens of affect, Polmuk discusses two films in which relics, *stūpas*, or their cinematic substitutes engender interrogations into traumatic twentieth-century histories of Thailand and Cambodia. John Clifford Holt turns our attention to “Deities” that appear in Theravāda cultures and whose presences, made material or not, structure ritual interactions with the supernatural. Moving from the *devas* of Sri Lanka to the *phi* of Thai-Lao Buddhist cultures to the *neak ta* of Cambodia and the *nats* of Myanmar, Holt describes how these figures participate in Theravāda cosmologies and play important roles in associated social and political organization. Finally, Patrick McCormick examines the “Mons,” an ethnolinguistic community whose coherence as such became anchored in imagined origins linked with those of Theravāda itself in mainland Southeast Asia. McCormick focuses on how this imagined foundational association of the Mons and Theravāda developed within British colonial Burma to become the keystone of modern Mon intellectual projects to write and interpret Mon history.

Taken together, the chapters in this *Routledge Handbook of Theravāda Buddhism* provide a detailed picture of Theravāda in different milieu over time and space. As we noted in the opening, they also provide a picture of this particular field of Buddhist Studies today. The ideas, practices, texts, objects, and people associated with Theravāda appear as historically contingent aspects of a tradition that is pluralistic but strives—be it in multifarious ways—toward singularity. Depending on the particular historical, geographical, social, or disciplinary vantage points adopted to view Theravāda, one can arrive at distinctively different interpretations of what Theravāda is. Readers may use the *Handbook* to come to terms with the coherence and contradiction that make up Theravāda Buddhism, exploring further its histories, as well as its use and limits as an analytical category. We hope that the work presented here will inspire new research as well as new research methodologies by which the inadequacy of our nominalist to our realist ambitions might be lessened and which might thus be better equipped to respond to the evolving dynamics of Theravāda and its study.

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