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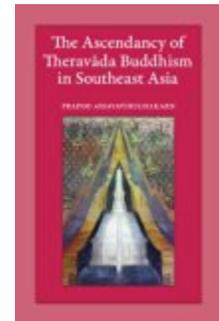
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Prapod Assavavirulhakarn. *The Ascendancy of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia.* Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2010. \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-974-9511-94-7.

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A Passage from India: The Coming of Buddhism to Southeast Asia

In this important publication, Prapod Assavavirulhakarn addresses several key questions that have dogged the study of Buddhism in Southeast Asia for many years, such as the precise nature of Buddhism in the first millennium and the relationship of Buddhism to the indigenous religions. He presents a general religious history of Southeast Asia and places Buddhism in the context of both indigenous religions and the Indian cultural formations that influenced the development of the region. Based upon the inscriptional record, he emphasizes that Theravāda Buddhism was present in the western part of Southeast Asia alongside the earliest forms of Buddhism and did not come only in the eleventh century after the reforms in Sri Lanka that unified the Saṅghas there. The author writes that the merit of the book may lie “not in discovering something new but in searching and becoming more perplexed” (p. xi), and accordingly he proceeds to open up a great number of avenues of inquiry into the kinds of Buddhist schools that came to Southeast Asia and exactly how and when they arrived. Some of these avenues he convincingly suggests might not be answerable in the current or foreseeable state of our knowledge.

The book provides a wide-ranging overview of what is known about the contours of Southeast Asian history and locates Buddhism within its social and political context during a period of more than a thousand years. As such, its seven chapters and 194 pages of text are necessarily thin on detail but that is not a weakness, because adequate evidence is marshaled for most of the points that are made, and the interested reader is directed to the

relevant, more detailed works on the history of the region, upon which the author draws. He does not undertake a large amount of original research, relying mainly on published inscriptions, general histories, traditional chronicles in Pali as well as vernacular Thai, accounts of premodern Chinese travelers, archeological reports, and other sources that are impressive and comprehensive, but also fairly standard for the historiography of the region.

At several places in the book, Prapod asserts that he is overthrowing the dominant theory that Theravāda Buddhism came to the region only during the eleventh century, but in the last few decades this theory has already lost some strength. Here, the book does suffer from the fact that it is based upon the author’s UC Berkeley dissertation that was completed twenty years ago. I was a little surprised to find no references to the two most important works about the roots of Buddhism in the region that have come out since his dissertation was completed, namely Robert Brown’s *The Dvāravatī Wheels of the Law and the Indianization of South East Asia* (1996) and Michael Aung-Thwin’s *The Mists of Rāmañña* (2005), both of which also problematize older narratives.

The audience for the book should be quite wide, encompassing those with a general interest in Buddhism or Asian history. It is written using very accessible language for the non-specialist, is refreshingly devoid of jargon, and does not go into the kind of minutiae that might scare off the more casual reader. However, a serious shortcoming is that there are numerous crucially impor-

tant Pali and Sanskrit passages cited from inscriptions or other texts that remain untranslated, both in the body of the book and in the notes. This fact greatly reduces the potential audience for what is otherwise a book that could appeal to a more general readership interested in the history of this important but understudied region.

The introduction begins with a considered reflection on the meaning of the terms “Southeast Asia” and “Buddhism,” and clarifies that the focus will be on the areas of Southeast Asia that were most influenced by Buddhist culture, namely what is modern-day Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. It also provides a succinct explanation of the confusing differences within Buddhist sectarian nomenclature. For example, “Theravāda” is a term that is remarkably undefined considering how often it is used. It is sometimes equated with the Sanskrit Sthaviravāda, which may connote all of the early non-Mahāyāna schools aside from Mahāsaṃghika, and other times with the particular school derived from Sri Lanka. The author also highlights the uncertainty about the exact relationship between different languages, such as Sanskrit, Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, and Pāli, with the different schools of Buddhism. As the author shows later in the book, this issue has very profound consequences, for it is not uncommon for scholars to attribute a text or inscription to one school or another based solely on linguistic evidence. To be clear, he therefore calls the religious system that can be derived from the Pali canon “Theravāda” and distinguishes it from ideas or practices that might be found in Pali inscriptions but whose source cannot be definitively traced to the canon as we now have it. These he refers to as “Pali Buddhism.”

There is a fair bit of attention paid in the book to Indianization, which Prapod describes as “a process of cultural relations between India and Southeast Asia” (p. 11), and the book importantly emphasizes that this involved the acculturation of Brahmanical, Sanskritic, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions. In fact, he sees Buddhism as part of a package of Indian ideas that took root in Southeast Asia, rather than as an abstract religion, which is a fruitful way to frame the phenomenon. He does remind us that Indianization was not a uniform process but took different shapes and adapted to the local cultures in different ways. He sets up a bit of a straw man in saying that “it is pointless to try to determine an exact moment Southeast Asia became ‘Indianized’” (p. 13) because I do not think that any serious scholar can be accused of trying to do such a thing. It is certain that large numbers of Indians never invaded and forced their culture upon the local inhabitants after some great battle that can be located in

time, but rather it was taken up enthusiastically by certain local groups and spread in that manner. While these “Indianized” states were not ruled by Indian princes, they coalesced around key ideas such as Dharmic kingship, Indian notions of jurisprudence, and the use of Indic writing. Indian ideas, such as these, he reminds us, could just as easily have been imported by Southeast Asian traders who went to India as by Indians who went to Southeast Asia, and the possibility that both of these factors were at work here must be considered.

Chapter 2 deals with the cultures of the region prior to the coming of Indian religions. This chapter is convincing, but it should be noted that because there is little direct historical evidence attesting to their nature, it is of necessity highly speculative. These cultures were the ground upon which the Indian religions were seeded, and therefore still influence the practices of a contemporary Southeast Asian “Buddhist.” The best way to think of the complex interaction between the native and Indian beliefs, according to Prapod, is as a system where each culture influenced the development of the other. The book looks at the earliest archaeological evidence from Paleolithic hunter-gatherer societies, examining what we can learn about their religious beliefs from the implements and bodily positioning evident at burial sites. The author speculates that the powers believed to lie within *śimā* stones in Thailand that demarcate the monastic boundaries might derive from an early Megalithic earth cult (p. 30) and that ancestor worship was probably common as well, based upon evidence of structures that were built above the graves. A number of speculations rely upon extrapolating backwards from practices that are still current, a strategy that suffers from the possibility that the culture of the early Common Era was in fact very different. In looking at the myths and legends that are peculiar to Southeast Asia, the author himself rightly points out that those that are not Indic in origin are not necessarily pre-Indianization. Some creation myths are clearly of indigenous origin, and others are derived from Buddhist cosmogonic tales, but whether the indigenous ones arose before or after Indian influence started to be felt, is, ultimately, unknown and probably unknowable. He also focuses on the pervasive concept of spirits, known in Thailand as *phī* and in Burma as *nat*, and looks at how Indian conceptions of *devas* and *devatās* were incorporated into this existing system, as well as how the Buddhist term *viññāna* has been used to refer to the consciousness that leaves the body of the deceased.

Chapter 3 deals with the very thorny problem of the introduction of Buddhism to Southeast Asia, which Pra-

pod points out consisted of a number of different kinds of Buddhism all taking root at one point or another. The traditional Buddhist account holds that King Asoka sent two missionaries, Soṇa and Uttara, to a place called Suvarṇabhūmi, which is located somewhere in Southeast Asia, but there is no independent confirmation of this event, nor is it known exactly where this place is. Prapod surveys the rather extensive literature on this topic and concludes that Suvarṇabhūmi refers not to a specific polity but to the general area east of the Bengal region of India. As to the traditional attribution of traders as the main vessels of Indianization by the academic community, the author also points out that this could not be the whole story because it is unlikely that traders would have been familiar with the high Sanskritic culture that came to the region along with the other cultural ideas. There is little doubt that Indian merchants brought the Buddhist and Hindu traditions and cults with them along with other aspects of culture as they sailed along the trade routes, starting probably with the Malay Peninsula and then expanding to Cambodia, Burma, and Thailand. Buddhism had an advantage over Hinduism because as is well known, there was a restriction on overseas travel upon Brahmans. This did not stop them from traveling in this way eventually, of course, but may have favored the spread of Buddhism through the merchants and later through missionary monks who would likely have accompanied traders on their routes. Prapod emphasizes that conversion of a region to Buddhism would not have occurred overnight but would have been the result of a fairly long process of acculturation and certainly would involve at minimum the establishment of a Saṅgha with the ability to perform the appropriate rites and rituals.

Prapod argues against the idea that it took until the fifth century for some form of Buddhism to first reach the area. He says that although the earliest iconographic evidence consists of Buddha images in the Amarāvati style dating from this period, since regional differences can already be seen in the statuary from Vietnam, Thailand, and Java, the style must have been introduced even earlier. He also points to the *Dharmacakras* from Dvāravatī which he believes “represent a very old tradition that was implanted in the area no later than the fourth century CE” (p. 67). Some more evidence to support this date would have been helpful, for it seems a little early to this reviewer. There are some seals that mention the Saṅgha from the second century CE, so by this period at the latest, at least some Buddhists must have been present in the region. Buddhism of some kind, argues the author, was probably introduced both from India and Sri Lanka, with

southern India playing a particularly significant role.

Chapter 4 details the features of Southeast Asian Buddhism prior to the eleventh century, which Prapod derives from Pāli, Sanskrit and vernacular inscriptions, archeological remains, statuary, and reliefs. A number of inscriptions contain canonical and extra-canonical quotations that would have been accepted by all the Buddhist groups, so unfortunately this cannot tell us much about the kind of Buddhism that was found in the region at the time. In Dvāravatī and Cambodia, the quotation inscriptions are in Pāli, but in Java they are in Sanskrit, and in the Pyu areas they are usually in Pāli but some Sanskrit examples have been found. The chapter contains a fairly detailed list of the various quotation inscriptions from these regions but the author warns us to be careful about associating them with one or another school of Buddhism, as has often been done based upon the linguistic evidence alone, for languages very similar to Pāli were used by other Hīnayāna sects, and Sanskrit was used by groups other than Mahāyāna, such as Sarvāstivāda and even possibly the Theravādin Abhayagiri Vihāra. Some Pyu gold plate inscriptions that are in Pāli and contain excerpts from the Abhidhamma, however, can definitely be associated with the Theravāda school. Prapod here provides the first evidence that Theravāda Buddhism specifically from Sri Lanka must have arrived in Thailand prior to the eleventh century. An inscription dated between the eighth and ninth centuries contains non-canonical verses from the *Telakaṭāhagāthā* that was composed in Sri Lanka. He also cites inscriptions showing that Mahāyāna and especially Yogācāra were known amongst the Khmer in the early eleventh century. He concludes from this study of the archeological remains that “Theravāda was the main sect in the Pyu and Dvāravatī cultures, and that Mahāyāna was dominant in the Khmer areas and the archipelago” (p. 105), adding as well that Brahmanical traditions are attested more in the record from this latter area. It is important to note that he does not rule out the presence of other sects in all these regions either.

An important theme of the book with regard to this subject is that the specific sectarian affiliations of the different early Buddhist communities in Southeast Asia are unlikely ever to be known. Indeed, Prapod questions whether it is really all that important to know them, for the majority of the Buddhist community would probably not have cared much or in some cases even known with which sect of the religion they were involved. Monks sometimes lived in the same monasteries and lay support was given to members of different sects even by the same

person. He reminds us that even today, most Buddhists in the region do not think of themselves as “Theravāda” Buddhists but rather simply as supporters of the Buddha’s *Sāsana* (teachings). They include in their practice ideas from a variety of different Buddhist sects from the Hīnayāna as well as the Mahāyāna traditions. They also include many practices that are not derived from Buddhism at all, such as the worship of local spirits.

Chapter 5 deals with the nature of religion in the region, with a focus on the ways that indigenous and Indian religions adapted to each other. Rather than assimilation or syncretism, the author says it is best to see the religious landscape as one in which different traditions existed alongside each other and interacted in complicated and symbiotic ways. Likewise, he also cautions against seeing the Indian traditions such as Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, and Brahmanism as hermetically sealed entities but rather as part of a greater Indian cultural system that was introduced into Southeast Asia. “People perceived religion as the institution in which to place their trust, with all religions being regarded as auspicious, and which could be applied to different situations in everyday life.... The idea that one professes to belong to a single religion is foreign to the Southeast Asian mind, which sees no need to synthesize multiple beliefs into one exclusive belief” (p. 147). As can be seen from comparing the Upanishads with the early Pāli texts, Prapod suggests that they were really grappling with very much the same kind of philosophical ideas, and later developed practices—*yoga*, *bhakti*, *tantra*—that reflected each other as well. The division of this package of Indian beliefs into strictly delineated religions, as well as the attempt to tease out the indigenous beliefs, may not entirely be a product of Western ways of thinking about religion, as the author appears to suggest, but it is certainly not terribly constructive when applied to the Southeast Asian situation. More properly, the different systems had spheres in which they were operative to varying degrees; for example, Buddhism provided the moral context and merit-making framework for most people, and Brahmanism was used for rituals connected with governance and kingship.

Chapter 6 looks at the shape of what is called Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia and commences by questioning the idea forwarded most famously by Melford Spiro that normative Buddhism has no concern for worldly matters but rather focuses exclusively on salvation. Therefore, the propitiation of divinities is not central to the religion. In contrast, Prapod points out that Buddhists not only venerate the Buddha and his images,

but they have worshipped the spirits and practiced supernaturalism since the time of the early canonical texts. Regardless of what is found in the canon, the author insists that popular practice is as central to the construction of Buddhism as are the texts. This is a very loaded issue but is also, it seems to me, a “pseudo-problem,” as Prapod might call it (p. 154), whose resolution lies simply in defining what counts as Buddhism in the context of any particular scholarly study being undertaken on the subject. He also criticizes Stanley Tambiah for creating “pseudo-problems” through the construction of a dichotomy between native and Buddhist concepts such as the *paahm/maukhwan*, who is an expert in local spirit rites, and the *bhikkhu*, or Buddhist monk (pp.154-155). He cautions furthermore against dividing Buddhism into an elite and popular mode, when the merit-making rites performed by the king are almost identical to those performed by simple villagers.

A crucial point made in the book that the author himself would likely admit is not supported strongly enough is that “Aniruddha was not converted to Theravāda via contact with Ceylon, but instead, through the Pyu or Mon cultures of lower Burma” (p. 162). This is unattested by any really reliable, non-ideological, contemporary evidence either way, as Michael Aung-Thwin has demonstrated in *The Mists of Rāmañña* (2005). The Burmese tradition as found in the *Sāsanavaṃsa* holds that he got the texts either from the Pyu or the Mon people, depending on which portion one reads, but a Thai tradition as recorded in the *Jinakālamāli* does say that he got them directly from Sri Lanka, which Prapod strangely omits in his detailed discussion of this issue. Exactly what happened under Aniruddha may be one of the unknowable issues in Southeast Asian history.

Prapod also studies the history of Buddhism at Sukhothai (1238-1438 CE) and comes to the conclusion that Buddhism was known in the area already before the time of Ramkhamhaeng (1279 CE) because the king mentions the Saṅgha in his inscriptions, but does not mention Theravāda specifically in any context, either as having arrived recently or as having been present for a long time. What is clear is that there are very few, if any, discernable differences from the historical record in the region between the Buddhism before and after the eleventh century. Merit-making practices, the social position of monks, and the texts that are still extant in inscriptions—all of these appear to be very similar, and there is certainly no explicit reference in contemporary records to a new form of “Theravāda” Buddhism arriving. Scholars have probably “conflated the history of a nation with the

history of religion” (p. 172). Since the Thai and Burmese nations are often conceived in nationalist historiography as having their roots during this period, it has worked well to posit that a new form of Buddhism was established at this time as well, thus allowing king and creed to arise anew together. The book under review, however, successfully demonstrates that this is not supported by the evidence.

The author concludes that most Southeast Asian Buddhists just think of themselves as Buddhist, rather than as belonging to one school or another, and most probably would not be able to recite the Four Noble Truths, much less explain subtle distinctions between different forms of Buddhism. “The study of Buddhism in Southeast Asia cannot be fruitful if doctrinal differences are overemphasized. Neither can its development be understood by imposing the dichotomy of ‘Great’ and ‘Little’ traditions, nor by positing tensions between ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ levels of belief or practice. These dichotomies do not accurately reflect the actual beliefs of the people” (p. 179). The idea of Theravāda, he says, has had little

cache amongst the common followers of the religion and should properly be understood as referring to a specific ordination tradition within which some monks were ordained. Sri Lanka was not the source of the Buddhist religion itself for most of these regions in the second millennium, but rather was the source of a specific ordination tradition, around which the religion itself continued to exist. According to Prapod, the only place where Theravāda as a set of doctrines, practices, and ordination lineages can be said to have been formally introduced in this period was Cambodia, which was primarily Mahāyāna until the weakening of the Khmer empire in the thirteenth century.

This is a wide-ranging, clearly written, and convincingly argued book that deserves to be read by all scholars interested in the history of Buddhism in Southeast Asia. It sums up much of the work that has been done about the early history of Buddhism in the region and as such sets a new baseline from which future discussions should rightly commence.

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