

**Julia Cassaniti.** *Living Buddhism: Mind, Self, and Emotion in a Thai Community.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015. 232 pp. \$22.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8014-5671-8.

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Do abstract concepts in Theravada Buddhism such as *anicca* (impermanence) or *upādāna* (clinging) impact the everyday lives of lay Buddhists? Or are they solely the purview of monks and scholars who have spent years in meditation or studying the details of the Pali Canon? Scholars have long suggested that the philosophical tenets of Buddhism have little if any impact on how the average lay person experiences his or her day-to-day life. They have often expounded two kinds of Buddhism to explain the discrepancy between what doctrine says Buddhist practice is and how many actually approach it. In Melford Spiro's *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes* (1970), for instance, he suggests there is a "nibbanic" kind aimed towards the ultimate goal: the end of the cycle of rebirth. Then there is a "kammatic" kind practiced by laity and focused on making merit in order to have a higher status rebirth rather than ending rebirth. For Spiro, while both monastics and laity are aware of one another's system, lay persons give little thought to "nibbanic" Buddhism. More recently, Kitiarsa Pattana's *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets: Thai Popular Buddhism Today* (2012) divides Thai Buddhism into two kinds. There is the state-sponsored, modern "mainstream" kind that is rooted in the doctrine of the Pali Canon. On the other hand is the "popular" kind focused on worldly

concerns, which draws heavily on supernaturalism, animism, Hinduism, and other non-Buddhist practices.

Such divisions have not gone without critique. There has been much work in recent years to take a more holistic approach to the study of religious practice. Justin McDaniel's *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (2011), Jeffrey Samuel's *Attracting the Heart: Social Relations and the Aesthetics of Emotion in Sri Lankan Monastic Culture* (2010), and Nancy Eberhardt's *Imagining the Course of Life: Self-Transformation in a Shan Buddhist Community* (2006) are some examples of this approach. Rather than separating Buddhist practice into monastic experts who really understand Buddhism and lay non-experts who are too busy with everyday life to fully understand Buddhism's finer points, these studies show how focusing on the complexity of lay-monastic relations and the everyday practices of both groups give a richer portrait of what it means to practice Buddhism.

Julia Cassaniti's *Living Buddhism* not only continues this trend in grounding the study of religion in how Buddhists live their day-to-day lives, but it also makes an important intervention in this work. She argues that "elite" Buddhist concepts like *anicca* do manifest in lay people's every-

day lives even if they may not be able to articulate the philosophical details. Cassaniti further suggests these concepts shape the very mental lives of laity, fundamentally impacting the way emotional life unfolds for them. This book thus not only has ramifications for Buddhist studies but also psychology and the study of emotions. In focusing on how religion is practiced in the hustle and bustle of everyday life, Cassaniti shows us how religion as a lived practice shapes the psychological lives of people and their narratives about health and illness. Rather than seeing culture or religion as a second-order schema that filters universal emotional responses, Cassaniti argues that the very experience of emotion is mediated by ideas of what leads to feelings and how they should be experienced. Buddhist concepts actively shape this process of experiencing emotion, thus impacting one's basic approach to the world.

Exploring the mental lives of individuals and how they interact with the cultural and religious worlds around them is a daunting task, and Cassaniti achieves it by grounding her argument in the rich ethnographic data she collected over a decade (2002–12). She focuses largely on two families in a small town she calls Mae Jaeng, which is about a two-hour drive west of Chiang Mai in northern Thailand. In relaying her own and her informants' quotidian experiences of working at the family shop, attending funerals, and helping in merit-making activities, she lays out the difficulties and uncertainties ethnographic research entails. The effect is to draw readers into Thai village life and give us an appreciation for the richness provided by ethnographic fieldwork.

Buddhism in Mae Jaeng has been influenced by a number of "flows" that have moved in and out of Thailand over the years, such as religious practices in Sri Lanka and neighboring countries, the Thai state that seemingly controls "elite" Buddhism, and local beliefs in animism. While trying to move beyond the separation between distinct kinds of Buddhism, Cassaniti does draw out con-

trasts that exist in Mae Jaeng. There is a separation between the Sangha—the monastic community—and the laity. She does complicate the notion of a rigid separation between these two communities, suggesting that the temple (*wat*) and village are closely interconnected in rural towns like Mae Jaeng. At the same time, though, her informants encourage some separation between monastic and lay life. As in the case of one man in Mae Jaeng who ordained as a monk, "living away from the hustle and bustle of household life ... let him take time to study teachings on how to be calm" (p. 55). There remains a sense that monks should ideally separate themselves from village life to best develop calmness. Another contrast is that Mae Jaeng is a "lowland" community made up mostly of northern Thais (Khon Muang) distinct from central Thailand as well as "hill tribe" communities that surround it. The village of Ban Ko Tao is one such community, a Karen Christian community not far from Mae Jaeng where Cassaniti also conducted fieldwork and interviews. This comparative approach furthers her argument that specifically Buddhist concepts do shape people's emotional lives in Mae Jaeng.

The book's five chapters, separated into three parts, are organized thematically. The first part deals with emotions and how terms around the heart (*jai*) such as "acceptance" or "making the heart" (*tham jai*) and having a "cool heart" (*jai yen*) define a certain emotional schema in the lives of people in Mae Jaeng. A good example of Cassaniti's vivid description of conducting ethnographic fieldwork is where she discusses the numerous events, ceremonies, rituals, and small interpersonal moments she went into hoping they would clearly reveal how people *really* felt. However, "there didn't seem to be much in the way of emotional encounters or outpourings of feelings" (p. 41). As she became more integrated within the community and her host family's lives, though, she saw how important developing a sense of calmness was for everyone. A gentle reminder to "be cool," to be *jai yen*, seemed omnipresent,

whether from a customer telling her to *jai yen* when she was rushing to fill his order or a friend who wasn't flustered when an appointment was forgotten. To try to understand just how ubiquitous *jai yen* was in people's personal lives, Cassaniti supplemented her participant-observation research with interviews. Nearly all interviewees made some unprompted comment about developing calmness and a cool heart. Many also connected the cultivation of a cool heart with religious activities such as going to the temple to feel calm. While not a religious feeling per se, "there was a general sense that cultivating calmness is a good Buddhist thing to do" (p. 55). Cassaniti suggests such religious practice trains people to embody particular affective comportments. In visiting temples, people feel good, and in feeling good, they feel calm and cool-hearted.

To better understand what cultivating a cool heart is doing for people, chapter 2 looks at a comparative group to see how emotions should not be managed. It is often helpful to "find others who didn't quite fit in, to see through the foil of their actions and others' responses to them" (p. 66). Since ideas of calmness seemed connected with Buddhist ideas of impermanence, Cassaniti looks to the Karen Christian community of Ban Ko Tao, which has a similar livelihood and environment to Mae Jaeng. In a later chapter, she emphasizes that she is not trying to set up an alternative, Christian model of emotion to compare to a Buddhist one, "because the categorical terms being used ... are never equal in revealing two different sets of practices" (pp. 138–139). Compared to Mae Jaeng, emotion in Ban Ko Tao was expressed much more openly. Religious practices such as attending church on Sunday encouraged people to talk about their personal struggles to the entire congregation. This, along with other experiences of managing emotions in Mae Jaeng, leads Cassaniti to suggest being calm and *jai yen* is not about distancing oneself from feelings or cultivating disdain for emotions. Instead, generating a cool

heart is aimed "toward crafting a calm affective equilibrium" (p. 78).

This experience of emotion counters what both psychologists and anthropologists have argued about emotions. The former often suggest emotions are universal experiences that are then filtered through cultural norms. The latter suggest emotions are wholly cultural ideas and practices. Thai ideas of "feelings" (*khwam ruu suuk*), "moods" (*arom*), and cultivating cool hearts do not fit either model. Instead, Cassaniti argues for "theoretical perspectives of the mind that take into account qualities of affect interpersonally shared in culture" (p. 81). Like the Buddhist concept of *vedanā* in which emotion is a co-construction between senses and ideas, emotion in Buddhist Thailand may be better understood as a process emerging out of individuals' experiences within a cultural world rather than either wholly personal psychological states or impersonal social constructions.

Chapter 3 explores "letting go" (*ploy*) as a key process in "making the heart." While letting go is a popular phrase even in the United States—as anyone with the (mis)fortune of being around children in the years following the release of Disney's *Frozen* (2013) knows—letting go in the context of Mae Jaeng is a bit different. Buddhism has much to say about letting go, especially around letting go of *upādāna*, attachments. Yet, like *anicca*, Cassaniti is interested in how colloquial terms like *ploy* stem from Buddhist concepts and work for people in accepting change. Focusing on how letting go is a process for making the heart reveals how *tham jai* is not so much a feeling; it is rather an orientation towards feeling. Continuing her knack for showing through ethnographic encounters, Cassaniti gives the example of her friend losing a thousand baht—no small amount of money for a rural Thai villager. While Cassaniti raises a big ado in the face of the loss, encouraging her friend to go back and look for the lost cash, her friend brushes it off as a trivial thing. From a

Western psychological perspective, one might want to say the friend is really feeling distressed but just covering it up by saying everything is okay. However, through Cassaniti's analysis, we come to see such statements as the active process of letting go. In making their hearts and accepting loss, people are actively creating equanimity.

The chapter is also noteworthy for its discussion of gender. Seeing how much work her friend Gaew was doing, Cassaniti reflects on whether her own "growing awareness of acceptance and nonattachment was just highlighting norms that served to perpetuate a gendered social order" (p. 101). Northern Thailand is notable for its matrilineal social structure—a man moves into the woman's natal home after marriage and homes and businesses often get passed down the female line—and the fact that women often make financial decisions for the family. Cassaniti thus concludes that letting go and making the heart are not particularly gendered. This is not to say, though, that hierarchy is not at all important. Being deferential (*kreng jai*) towards superiors is important and points towards how emotions are co-constructed interpersonally: one needs to be aware of how their own feelings impact others' feelings. Cassaniti's nod to the specific social context of northern Thailand is a welcome addition here, and one I would have liked to have seen more of throughout the book.

The dangers of not letting go become apparent in chapter 4, in which the story of Sen's alcoholism, which is briefly introduced in the prologue, comes to a head. Sen, Gaew's brother, is unable to accept several recent events: the death of his grandmother, the rapid changes he sees Mae Jaeng going through, and his burgeoning same-sex relationship with a long-time friend. Sen also lacks an interest in religious life, rarely if ever going to temple festivals or making merit, and he never temporarily ordained (to the chagrin of his mother). His attachments and inability to let go drive his alcohol addiction. To the consternation

of Cassaniti, Sen's family seemingly does little to intervene, trying to just let Sen be. She returns to the Christian village of Ban Ko Tao where everyone there seems to agree with her: Sen's family should be more proactive, talking about it openly and yelling at him if need be. This contrast is not to elucidate a Karen Christian emotional schema but rather to highlight the importance of impermanence and letting go in Buddhist Mae Jaeng.

Describing Sen and his family's struggles offers an important corrective to much of the literature on mental health and Buddhism, which often romanticizes the power of letting go and mindfulness practice. Sen's alcoholism is largely perpetuated because he knows he should let go and cannot, but drinking provides him a way to not think, to become indifferent toward his holding on: "Sen was inscribed within, rather than apart from, the larger cultural orientations of his community, and his problems were understood within them" (p. 140). The emotional process of letting go can aid people in accepting loss. However, knowing that one should—but cannot—process events in this way gives meaning to people's mental health problems while not always providing clear solutions.

Chapter 5 addresses the concept of karma and how it fits in with ideas around letting go and acceptance. In the philosophy of "modern" or "rational" Buddhism, karma is often downplayed as a superstition. Or in the context of Western mindfulness, it is frequently psychologized such that karma is understood as akin to getting stuck in a behavioral rut. In Mae Jaeng, though, karma is glossed as it often is in Thailand: if you do good, you get good (*tham di dai di*). For Cassaniti's informants, karma is not a belief. It is commonsense and a universal truth, like gravity, even if they cannot explain exactly how it works. In using karma to explain why something happens to a particular person at a particular time, karma is part of the cultural landscape of Mae Jaeng. Like much of the Buddhist world, those in Mae Jaeng are most

interested in making merit and creating good karma. If the goal of Buddhism, though, is to get rid of all karma, why are people so insistent on creating good karma? Cassaniti argues against Spiro's solution of separating between "nibbanic" and "kammatic" Buddhisms. Instead, Cassaniti's informants reconcile this question by suggesting that making good karma can cancel out bad karma, leaving zero net karma. Alternatively, they see making good karma in a sense as not making any karma at all. This is possible because of how karma is connected to intentions and emotions: "making merit is about acting with a certain emotional countenance, a particular affective demeanor" (p. 160). Returning to Sen's story, we see him decline to the point of losing touch with reality, having nearly complete liver failure, and ending up in a Chiang Mai hospital where he isn't expected to live much longer. In the midst of this terrible situation, though, his family cultivates an atmosphere of calmness. They draw on the process of letting go and making the heart, accepting that it was karma that created the situation.

In the end, we are glad to see Sen make a recovery. Even as his health improves, there is a letting go of any clinging to that progress. Sen, his family, and his friends don't talk about it. Cassaniti concludes by suggesting that the "local psychological model of health" in Mae Jaeng is "part of a broader system of cause and effect" that challenges theoretical perspectives on personal agency (pp. 177–178). Scholars often suggest agency is acting against culture. Instead, agency can manifest in acting through culture. Letting go and acceptance are often seen as passivity, but in the context of Buddhist Mae Jaeng, they are a chief form of agency: "The more one is able to let go of affective attachments, the more one becomes in control of his or her life and surroundings" (p. 180). Such is the case for Sen, who sees his eventual letting go of wanting things to be how they were in the past as being what allows him to overcome his alcoholism. To make this argument, Cassaniti says she purposefully collapsed Buddhism

and culture. This is to counter a long history of Buddhist studies scholarship that has tried to distill Buddhism down to its "true" essence. By still drawing on "doctrinal" Buddhism but how it is put into practice in everyday life, Cassaniti aims to contribute to the burgeoning interest in understanding the lived experience of religion. She is "suggesting a move away from the study of authority ... residing in religious virtuosos and a move toward regular people as sources of knowledge about religious traditions" (p. 182).

Like any good scholarship, *Living Buddhism* raises about as many questions as it answers. In the interest of space, I will relay just one. Some of the regional, political, and economic specificities of Mae Jaeng are mentioned throughout the text, but the focus is very much on how religious concepts and practices shape mental life. While the relationship between religious practice and psychological experience is an important one, at times I wondered what political, economic, or historical processes were supporting laity's orientation towards letting go and accepting circumstances. During the time of her fieldwork, Thailand was coming out of a financial crisis from the late 1990s, witnessing an ailing king, and experiencing the rise of a populist prime minister and his government's dissolution by coup-makers. Situating the day-to-day life of Mae Jaeng within this broader context of political and social changes could have illuminated the historical specificity that gives rise to or bolsters particular connections between religious concepts and mental life. That is, I wondered to what extent larger social processes were making the cultivation of letting go and acceptance more central, and whether given different circumstances, other Buddhist concepts would be more salient in everyday life. Hopefully, Cassaniti's or others' future work will help elucidate this. What *Living Buddhism* does do is show the importance of including mental and emotional life in the picture when thinking about how religion shapes the lives of everyday people. Such an intervention makes this book an

important read for any scholar of Buddhism. The text's accessible and engaging narrative would also make it a great book for introductory classes in religious studies, Asian studies, and psychological anthropology.

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