
Reviewed by Nicola Tannenbaum (Lehigh University)
Published on H-Buddhism (May, 2019)
Commissioned by Thomas Borchert (University of Vermont)

Weikza have fascinated academic observers of Burma since Michael Mendelson first wrote about them in the early 1960s. Weikza, or in its longer form, weikzado, are, literally, masters of knowledge: they are religious virtuosos who have acquired mystical powers through keeping Buddhist precepts and meditation and they have mastered weikza arts that include alchemy and medicine. They may no longer inhabit human bodies but they are not dead; their goal is to be alive to hear the preaching of the next Buddha, Maitreya and thus become enlightened. They remain available and accessible to humans, particularly those associated with the cults that surround their disciples. The term weikza is an ambiguous one; it can refer to particular weikza who have left this world but it can also refer to men studying to become weikza. They have remained an exotic Other within the more normative explorations of Theravada Buddhism. And they seem to occur only in Burma. The authors in this volume put aside normative understandings of Burmese Buddhism to examine the multiple roles weikza play within the broader Burmese religious landscape.

Weikza cults are best known through the early work of scholars such as Michael Mendelson and Melford Spiro. The editors frame the volume as introducing younger scholars and making their research on weikza more broadly available. The chapters explore weikza cults in contemporary Burma and their places within Burmese Theravada Buddhist practices. The volume had its origin in a two-part panel, "Encountering the Weikza: The Unity and Diversity of a Burmese Phenomenon" at the Burma Studies Conference in July 2010 in Marseille, France. This volume includes all the presenters except Veronica Futterknecht. Alicia Turner is added as an editor to the volume and she, along with Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière and Giullame Rozenberg, provides a foreword that provides an overview of the volume. Kate Crosby adds an introductory preface and Steve Collins, the discussant on the panel, provides the volume’s postscript.

Crosby’s preface and Collins’s postscript frame the volume within broader concerns of Western scholarship and the complex nature of both Theravada Buddhism and the Pali canon. Crosby, in “The Other Burmese Buddhism,” raises the question of why scholarship on insight meditation flourishes while there is a dearth of scholarship on weikza, even though the early analyses of each were roughly contemporaneous. She suggests that Western scholars tend to appreciate the seemingly scientific and rational forms of meditation while distrusting those practices that involve magic and that they see as “superstition.” Yet, as Crosby notes, there are other forms of Buddhist meditation where the development of mystical power is not bizarre. Collins’s argues that within the contested understanding of both Theravada Buddhism and the Pali canon that weikza are neither bizarre nor non-canonical.

The volume is divided into three parts: “Locating Weikza Cults in the Burmese Religious Landscape,” “Defenders of Buddhism: Weikza Rituals for Safeguarding Religion,” and “Technologies and Figures of Power: Weikza Specialists as Diviners, Diagram Makers, and Exorcists.” There is a helpful glossary of many of the
Burmese terms at the end of the volume


Pranke sees similarities between weikzas and charismatic monks who promoted vipassana meditation. (Vipassana is the currently popular insight meditation that, in the United States, floats free from its Burmese Buddhist roots.) The charismatic monks who helped establish vipassana meditation and who, through their meditation practices, are thought to have become become arahants, that is, to have achieved enlightenment. Pranke discusses the weikza whose training and practices allows them to acquire sufficient knowledge and power to exit the human realm and wait for the coming of the next Buddha. Although they are no longer in the human realm, they are available to their cult followers. Weikza are similar to monks in that they meditate, although usually via a different practice than insight meditation, and keep Buddhist precepts, albeit fewer than the ones kept by monks. These are certainly two of the similarities. But for Pranke the major similarity is that lay people venerate the preserved remains of both in similar ways and make the same sort of wishes/requests for health, prosperity, and good rebirths to both. He concludes: “while the respective traditions which they represent remain at odds, these two ideals of human perfections—the arahant worshipped because he has died his final death, and the weikza-do because he will life forever—find a kind of resolution and a common meaning in the eyes of the Buddhist faithful in the bodies they leave behind” (p. 21).

While Pranke provides a historical and descriptive account of what he sees as the relationship between arahants and weikza as ideal types, Schober examines the relationship between weikza practices and the orthodox or normative forms of Buddhism at the political center. Her discussion ranges over earlier writings about weikza and includes popular modern novels in which weikza appear as both good and bad characters. Rather than argue that weikza cults are inherently millennial and examples of non-orthodox Buddhism, she suggests that “weikza practices constitute a subversive discourse located at the margins of a conventional (i.e., reformed) field of merit and power” (p. 35). Weikza practices are “polytropic and hybrid expressions ... in a Buddhist discourse that potentially challenges or competes with the center of power and its merit making practices” (p. 25).

Brac de la Perrière focuses on the ways that weikza and spirits communicate with and through human beings. For her, weikza practices are “not a single bounded realm, but exist in complex dialogical relationships criss-crossing the overall religious landscape” (p. 54). Her interest is in the ways in which humans mediate their relationships with weikza and spirits. Spirits possess their human interlocutors and speak through them; the possessed person has no memory of what was said through her mouth. Spirit mediums are, generally speaking, female while those who lead weikza cults are usually male. The weikza speaks directly to the cult leader’s mind and he conveys what the weikza said to the rest of the followers.

All three chapters work to define the roles weikza play within different theoretical and analytical frameworks. Pranke’s chapter is historical, highlighting what he sees as the similarities between weikza and saints. Pranke’s analysis of the relationship between “saints and wizards” is, unfortunately, not grounded in how Burmese understand these two forms of religious virtuosity. His conclusion would have been a good place to begin the exploration of how various Burmese understand both weikza and arahants and how and why they are similar and different. Like Pranke, Schober seeks to locate the origins of weikza practice in China and India, although she also links weikza practices to those of tantric Buddhism that occurred in other areas of Southeast Asia. This would be worth exploring in detail; too often scholars working within a normative Buddhist framework attribute the non-normative aspects to corrupting influences from other traditions. Schober’s analysis relies on postmodern theorizing in order to frame and contrast weikza practices with the center’s normative Buddhism. Such grand theorizing has its place, but Schober does not provide the fine-grained understanding of the situation on the ground that would make such theorizing more plausible. Unlike the other papers in this section, Brac de la Perrière analysis is grounded in the ways in which spirit mediums and leaders of weikza congregations describe their interaction with spirits and weikza. This kind of detailed investigation and comparison provides the necessary ethnographic grounding for developing appropriate analytical understandings of Burmese Buddhist practices.
Part 2, "Defenders of Buddhism: Weikza Rituals for Safeguarding Religion," contains two chapters: Niklas Foxeus’s "The World Emperor’s Battle against the Evil Forces" and Keiko Tosa’s "From Bricks to Pagodas: Weikza Specialists and the Rituals of Pagoda-Building." This section best exemplifies the volume’s title, Champions of Buddhism. Foxeus’s paper is an ethnographic account of a weikza congregation and the activities they carry out to protect both Buddhism and Burma. Tosa’s chapter provides details on how those that follow the weikza path protect the construction of Buddhist buildings. Both authors discuss their methods and sources of information. Like, Brac de la Perrière, their interest is in providing an account grounded in the ways their interlocutors understand and talk about their situation and the role of weikza knowledge within it.

Foxeüs’s focus is on a particular weikza congregation that seeks to defeat evil and protect Buddhism through their use of the supernatural powers acquired through their practices. Unlike Schober, Foxeus argues that this is a millennial cult whose goal is to drive out Western influences and to protect and spread Buddhism throughout the world. From the congregants’ perspective, this would create world peace. To make his argument, he interviews members of the congregation as well as analyzes the texts associated with this group. The congregation is a royalist one connected to Setkya Min, the son of the king who reigned when the British conquered lower Burma. Although he was said to have been killed due to palace intrigues, people believe that the weikza Bo Bo Aung saved him by taking him to the weikza realm, where he eventually became a weikza. The Setya Min can be seen as an archetype of the world-conquering ruler who protects Buddhism and reigns over a peaceful world. This congregation is organized along military lines, with the leader identified with Setkya Min. The group is at war with the forces of evil but the weapons they use are supernatural ones, charged with power from their meditation, precept keeping, and their practices along the weikza path. The members of the congregation use these weapons to attack evil and defend Buddhism. Foxeus sees them as seeking “to decolonize the Burmese mind and the social order” (p. 105) and argues that by engaging in the battle against anti-Buddhist evil the "ariya-weikza organization constitute a moral, royal, and nationalist community, led by Setkya Min, a Buddhist world emperor” (p. 105).

Tosa examines the role of weikza not in battle against evil but as protectors of Buddhist monuments and, particularly, the successful construction of pagodas (also known as chedis or stupas). The person with weikza knowledge serves as the master of ceremonies for rituals that mark each stage of the pagoda’s construction. After a brief discussion of the stages for building pagodas and the ritual experts she consulted, Tosa provides an account of the final ritual for a pagoda, that of placing the umbrella on its top and consecrating the site. Here the weikza Bo Min Gaung is said to have worked with his followers to protect the pagoda site and remove both human and spiritual obstacles that would hinder the project. The ritual was a three-day affair, involving monks, leaders of weikza congregations, and spirit mediums. Persons seeking to build pagodas and those with weikza knowledge mutually support each other; they need ritual experts with weikza knowledge to ensure the completion of the project, and those with weikza knowledge, like Foxeus’s ariya-weikza army, seek to protect and expand Buddhism.

Part 3, "Technologies and Figures of Power: Weikza Specialists as Diagram-Makers, Diviners, and Exorcists," contains three chapters: Thomas Patton’s “In Pursuit of the Sorcerer’s Power: Sacred Diagrams as Technologies of Potency;” Celine Coderey’s “Healing through Weikza: Therapeutic Cults in the Arakanese Context;” and Guillaume Rozenberg’s “Powerful Yet Powerless, Powerless Yet Powerful: Being an Exorcist in Burma.” Each chapter provides detailed ethnographic accounts of how weikza acquire power and use that power to help people. Together they broaden the understanding of weikza to include championing the well-being of Buddhists. The chapters move from ways men on the weikza path acquire power (Patton) to how people who have the power use it to cure (Coderey) or to perform exorcisms (Rozenberg).

Patton’s chapter discusses how men on the weikza path work to embody power by making and then consuming the ashes of magical drawings (in or yantra) dissolved in water. To start, a man needs a teacher so that he can learn the proper drawing sequences and the chants that go with each element of the drawing. The process is quite complex, involving purification, chanting, and the exacting process of making magical drawings. A man on the weikza path must make and consume a large number of these magical drawings before he can acquire their power. After all this, if the power of the magical drawing does not arise in him, then he made mistakes in the way he drew or consumed them and must repeat the whole process. The combination of the chants, the proper construction of the drawings, and the consumption of the drawings’ ashes is how those on the weikza path learn to embody weikza knowledge. About weikza practices Pat-
ton concludes, “We should resist the temptation to explain away these practices as simply forms of contemporary Burmese popular religiosity or as a degenerative syncretism comprising Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements” (p. 157). Weikza use texts as embodiments of power that they then consume; this is at odds with Western scholars who assume texts are simply sources of religious knowledge. Classically “non-Buddhist” practices include anything dealing with spirits, using power derived from Buddhism to deal with spirits, and so on. Patton addresses this at the end of his chapter when he discusses the range of views, both Western and Burmese, of what counts as properly Buddhist. Here he argues that from the weikza perspective, their practices are part of normative Buddhism, however one defines it. This is an important argument, moving beyond dialogues between center and periphery to suggest that we should pay attention to the full range of perspectives on what are normative Buddhist practices and who, how, and why people make claims that this or that practice is or is not properly Buddhist.

Coderoy’s chapter moves us away from central Burma to examine how healers in Arakan draw on the powers of weikza for their power to heal spirit-caused illnesses. Coderoy’s argument about the debate between Buddhist and non-Buddhist practices is phrased in her informants’ terms and understandings. Diviners, while they are not on the weikza path, may diagnose the cause of the illness with the help of weikza; they are able to do this because they meditate and keep precepts. Healers on the weikza path rely on weikza for help treating patients. These healers are seen as morally ambiguous because they can potentially use their power and skill to harm as well to heal. Buddhism legitimizes their practices and assures their clients that they will use their power for good. Coderoy’s discussion highlights another dimension of weikza cult practices different from weikza as champions of Buddhism.

Rozenberg discusses the Shweyingyaw weikza congregation known for its ability to perform exorcisms. The power to exorcise comes from initiation into the congregation. This power comes from a substance made by the founding weikza. For an initiation, this substance is ground into a powder that is then incorporated into the materials used to make tattoos. Rozenberg sees exorcists as quite powerful because of their ability to drive out malefic spirits possessing a person. But he also argues that they are powerless because they do not “own” the power to exorcise; that power comes from the weikza and the substance he made. In conclusion, Rozenberg compares the initiated members of this congregation to the possession specialist, the shaman, and the church priest. Unlike the possession specialists, the members of the congregation are never possessed and unlike the shaman they do not travel to the spiritual plane. He suggests that they are most similar to the church priest, who acts as an intermediary between the spiritual power and humans, an argument that parallels Brac de la Perrière’s.

Although I realize this is a volume dedicated to weikza practices in contemporary Burma and the category weikza appears to be unique to Burma, practices very similar to weikza are widespread throughout both mainland and island Southeast Asia. A few authors mention similar practices within the region but most ignore the political, social, and religious connections that extend beyond the borders of what is now Burma. For example, meditation and asceticism as means to acquire power is widespread throughout the region. I would have appreciated a concluding chapter that discussed the dimensions of contrast and similarity among these as well as contextualized weikza practices within similar regional practices. If this were done, we would not have to simply assert that this is just Burmese Buddhism but rather we would be able to show what elements are unique to Burma and would be better positioned to explain what weikza practices in Burmese history and social life led to.

This volume presents the reader with a smorgasbord of weikza activities, from curing and exorcism to a form of resistance to the hegemonic power of the political centers. We see weikza as protecting Buddhism, healing and protecting others, those seeking the weikza path so they, too, might become weikza awaiting the arrival of the next Buddha. The chapters are well written and the editors have done a good job putting them together and dealing with translation issues. The chapters I found most convincing are the ones grounded in the everyday practices of lived Buddhism. People interested in Burma and the variations in Theravada Buddhist practices will find this collection intriguing. This volume would be useful in upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses in religion and/or Southeast Asian studies, as long as the professor provides the background necessary to facilitate students’ understanding.

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