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Theravada Buddhism

Continuity, Diversity, and Identity

Kate Crosby

WILEY Blackwell

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For Claire

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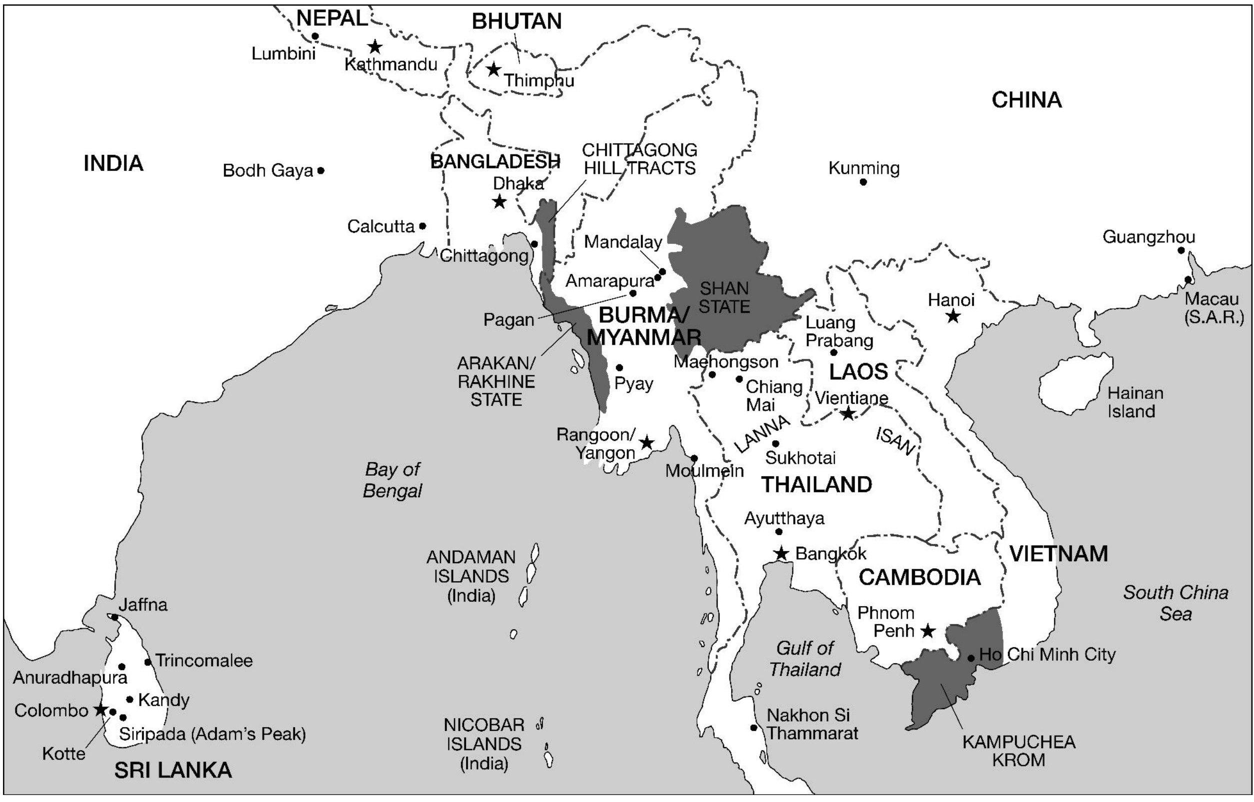
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Nakhon Si
Thammarat
KAMPUCHEA
KROM
Kotte
SRI LANKA

Introduction

The simplest definition of a Buddhist is one who "takes refuge" in the "three refuges." The first refuge is the Buddha, who found the path to salvation in relation to which Buddhism as a religion developed. The second refuge is the Dhamma, the truth or teaching realized and promulgated by the Buddha. The third refuge is the Sangha, the communities of monks and nuns who have pursued and preserved the Dhamma, and provided religious and other support to the communities that materially supported them. Buddhism is the term now used for the religion of those individuals and communities that maintain and support the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha so that they continue to be available as refuges.

Theravada is the form of Buddhism that dominates the religious life of many communities in Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka, Thailand, the Union of Burma, and the Kampuchea Krom region of Vietnam. In Bangladesh, it is followed by the Barua, Chakma, Rakhine, and Marma ethnic groups, and in southern China by the Tais (Shan) of Yunnan. Historically it was also important in South India and the Maldives, and had a wider presence in South and Southeast Asia more generally. In the modern period, it has been adopted in Indonesia, adapted in India, and introduced into Nepal, traditionally a homeland of Vajrayana Buddhism, mostly among specific groups redefining their identity. At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, increasing interest in Theravada led to its presence in the traditional homelands of Mahayana Buddhism in East Asia. It has also spread, through cultural influence, mission, and Diaspora, to other continents – to the Americas, Europe, Australasia, and, most recently, Africa.

Theravada is a community religion shaped by tradition, but the stereotype is that it is a religion of the book. The book in question is the "Pali Canon," a large collection of works regarded as the word of the Buddha who lived in north India in the sixth- to fifth-century BCE. For Theravada Buddhists, this is the highest authority on what constitutes the Dhamma (the truth or teaching of the Buddha) and the organization of the Sangha (the community of monks and nuns). Pali is a classical language formed in ancient India, and the Pali Canon is the only Buddhist Canon to survive in its entirety in an Indic language. This has given Theravada the reputation of being the earliest surviving form of Buddhism. Theravada identifies itself as the form of Buddhism that arrived in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia in the middle of the third-century BCE after a rehearsal of the Pali Canon to ensure the purity and accuracy of the Dhamma it contained. This rehearsal is referred to as the "third council." At the same time the

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Sangha was also "purified" by the expulsion of wayward monks not able to profess this true Dhamma. This was done, Theravada sources tell us, with the help of the great Emperor Asoka. The missionaries that then arrived in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia came under his auspices and included his own son, the monk Mahinda, and his daughter, the nun Saṅghamittā. It was they who established the Sangha of monks and nuns in Sri Lanka, fulfilling a prediction made by the Buddha on his mythical visits to the region. This origination myth provides the protocol for a relationship of mutual support between Sangha and state, as well as emphasizing Theravada's adherence to "original" Buddhism.

Three other features of Theravada inform its identity as "early." Firstly, while the Buddha is regarded as having been beyond human rather than an ordinary human being (contrary to some Western interpretations), the attitude toward him in Theravada is and remains realist (he really existed in the world) and relatively simple in comparison with understandings of Buddhahood and the greater proliferation of Buddhas that developed in other currently extant forms of Buddhism. Secondly, the Dhamma of Theravada, even in its most complex philosophical form (*Abhidhamma*), remains a type of realism: the external world that we experience is real. This contrasts with types of idealism that developed in other forms of Buddhism. Thirdly, the Sangha of Theravada retains visible forms of discipline associated with the Buddha's early disciples. These include a ceremony that marks the giving up of the trappings of lay life, cleanly shaven heads, relatively simple monastic "saffron" robes, not eating after noon, remaining celibate, relying to some extent on regular donations from laypeople, and, for the most part, abstaining from manual labor. Theravada's self-identification as early has been an important concept not only for personal belief and practice but also in the politics and economics of the religion and the region. It has allowed for a pattern of repeated reforms and it has informed the exporting of Theravada monks and teachings, especially meditation, to the wider world.

Problems with the Definition of "Theravada Buddhism"

Theravada Buddhism's reputation for being the earliest surviving form of Buddhism is developed in contrast to other forms of Buddhism, which are labeled "Mahayana" and "Vajrayana." These are the umbrella terms commonly used for the Buddhisms of East Asia and Central Asia / the Himalayas, respectively.

Those who become more familiar with any of these forms of Buddhism quickly realize that these categories are not fixed, exclusive, or comprehensive entities. In fact, there are deep problems with such categorization, which can make us blind to the fluidity, complexity, diversity, and richness of any actual manifestation of Buddhism in real people and communities. To label and define the living traditions that have emerged from two and a half millennia of history in this way is a form of essentialism. Essentialism, while often a useful tool of classification, can at its worst be a sinister tool of control.

In fact, it is only in the modern period that the term *thera-vāda*, literally "doctrine of the senior monks," came to be equated with the community religion of this region, becoming its official designation at the World Fellowship of Buddhists in 1950 (Perreira 2012: 561). The term *sthavira/thera* "senior monk" and its parallels in other languages were used by several branches of Buddhism, in their attempts to classify Buddhist divergence, to refer to an early division within the Buddhist fold between two groups: the *sthaviras*, and, usually, the Mahāsaṃghikas (Bareau 1955/2013: 23). The doctrinal positions preserved in the earliest

layers of Theravada texts as well as Theravada's own historiography places it as a development within the *sthavira* side of that division. Within *one branch of sthavira/thera Buddhism*, the Mahāvihāra in Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka in the fifth-century CE, that is, 1000 years after the death of the historical Buddha, the term *thera-vāda* was used to refer to the teachings of senior monks, particularly those senior monks who gathered together immediately after the Buddha's death at a meeting called "the first council." The phrase was used in this way by the Mahāvihāra as it was codifying the preservation of its teachings (including the Pali Canon). The purpose of compiling these accounts of the first council at that point was to attribute to the Buddha's immediate disciples and their successors a process of rehearsing and recording the Buddha's teachings and rules in such detail that it could authorize the Pali Canon as it was rehearsed at the Mahāvihāra all those centuries later. The Mahāvihāra tradition also attributed to those early enlightened disciples the extensive commentaries that it had begun to systematize and "retranslate" into Pali at that time, the fifth-century CE. In the twelfth century, the Mahāvihāra monastic tradition came to dominate the Buddhism of Sri Lanka and would in turn strongly influence the textual and ordination lineages of Southeast Asia, across the forms of Buddhism that came at a later date still to be termed Theravada. Its claim to the authority of preserving the doctrine of the early senior monks was consolidated through a further period of reviewing this textual transmission and writing additional commentaries and handbooks.

The account of the first council, coupled with that of later councils, especially the third council connected with Asoka (mentioned earlier), validates the Pali Canon and commentaries, as the ultimate scriptural authority for Theravada Buddhism today. This in turn allows for the corresponding claim to earliness and authenticity on the part of Theravada. However, it is clear that the texts and the stories of their authenticity were the work of centuries. Moreover, there are also many other texts, written, visual, and aural, in many languages and media, that inform Theravada Buddhism as it is now practiced and as it was practiced over the centuries. Like other forms of Buddhism, what we now term Theravada is the process and product of two and a half millennia since the historical person referred to as the Buddha began preaching the teachings and institutions from which all forms of Buddhism developed. Within Theravada we frequently find doctrines, interpretations, and practices that have been more closely associated with Mahayana and Vajrayana. While these could be put down to the influence of Mahayana and Vajrayana on Theravada, the concept of Theravada as the religion of a community, ethnic group, and even nationality as a whole is a recent development. For most of the history of Buddhism, distinctions of doctrine and textual authority have been a matter of concern for a minority of scholars and practitioners, often coming to a head at points of crisis. The history of Buddhism in the region we now identify as Theravada shows different doctrinal and practice groups existing alongside and intertwined with one another. The current dominance of what is now defined as "Theravada" is the result of a number of factors, including which monasteries won in competitions to win royal sponsorship in the medieval period; and how Buddhist history came to be written at points of marked identity formation, that is, when big political changes led a group or community to redefine themselves. Key periods when this happened differ from region to region, but the eleventh to twelfth centuries marked one such watershed, as also did the nineteenth to twentieth centuries.

The definitions of Theravada that formed in the nineteenth to twentieth centuries owe much to changing conceptions of religion, rationality, science, and identity. Definitions of sameness and contrast became important in marking territory, ensuring allegiance and bolstering status at a marked period of shifting and contested power relations globally. This general picture has been complicated by and has interacted with Western Buddhist Studies scholarship

that from the nineteenth through into the late twentieth centuries was also seeking to differentiate Buddhist traditions and schools and in the main did so on a purely doctrinal basis. The *locus classicus* that brought together the research that had been conducted in relation to the early schools of Buddhism by the time of its publication and went on to be the basis of further refinement in this area is the work of André Bareau (1955/2013). In it Theravada is identified as a later subgroup of the early schools emerging from the *sthavira* side of a conjectured early split between Sthavira and Mahāsaṃghika factions. Bareau then defines Theravada purely by the 222 doctrinal theses claimed as "orthodox" in the *Abhidhamma* book, the *Kathāvatthu*, compiled at the third council, even while observing how different the lived Theravada of different regions was on the ground (1955/2013: 275–326). East Asian and Western understandings of Theravada in this way, and the concomitant association of it with pre-Mahayana Buddhism, led to it being labeled as one of the *Hīnayāna* "inferior vehicle" schools, a pejorative term found in Mahayana *sūtras* to refer to the Buddhism of the opponents in those *sūtras*. It was in reaction to this identification that representatives from what was then termed the "Southern" branch of Buddhism began from the end of the nineteenth century to grapple with how to refer to the branch(es) of Buddhism represented in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia (Perreira 2012: 510ff.), a process that led to the decision cited earlier to adopt Theravada as a collective label.

Rather than try to untangle the extent to which "Theravada" is *thera-vāda*, this book accepts the fluid definitions of Theravada to be found implicitly and explicitly among the people who identify themselves as Theravada Buddhists now and in recent history. It also accepts the fluid definitions of the Dhamma (truth), *sāsana* (transmitted teachings and associated institutions), and community (human and nonhuman) of those who contributed to the creation and continuity of the forms and manifestations of Buddhism on which "Theravada Buddhists" have been able to draw. What they believe(d), practice(d), and regard(ed) as authoritative is accepted here as Theravada belief, practice, and authority. This book therefore draws on a range of media and approaches, including fieldwork, for the evidence of what constitutes Theravada today. It draws on the evidence of texts and archeology for the views of those communities of the past that contributed to the current construction of Theravada.

Mostly the evidence we have for the past comes from textual collections preserved primarily by monks. While rich and diverse, such texts reflect the perspective of a minority, literate, usually monastic, usually male group, although shaped by the full range of humans and other beings and institutions with whom and which they interacted. This means that while the book aims to consider the views of animals and other beings as well as humans, children as well as adults, women as well as men, laypeople as well as monastics, and nuns as well as monks, the nature of the available evidence means that this quest is inherently doomed to failure. This particular challenge is greater for the past than for the present.

The fact that many Theravada Buddhists accept the idea that their form of Buddhism is earlier than other forms allows for debates over what is "true" or "orthodox" Theravada and what is "heterodox," in spite of the absence of a central authority for this issue either in the past or present since the Buddha himself "discarded his lifespan." Such debates are considered and questioned in this book in relation to the topics of the individual chapters. At the same time, there is no fixed distinction out there in the real world between Buddhist and non-Buddhist practices. For example, practices using protective string and recalling the spirits in Laos are found among those who identify themselves as Buddhists and those who do not. Feeding of ancestors is similarly found throughout Southeast Asia, among Buddhist and non-Buddhist families alike. Buddhists in Sri Lanka may find occasion to attend a Christian church

whose patron saint has a reputation for assisting with matters of employment and Sri Lankan Catholic employees will allow their wrists to be bound with protective Buddhist string when prompted by an occasion at their workplace.

Distinctions between Buddhist and non-Buddhist practices can help us organize our knowledge and understand what we see. Yet what begins as a conceptual prop may then become a hindrance to a deeper understanding of the subject. In an inclusive study, which sees "what Buddhists do" as "Buddhist," such distinctions are difficult to address. On the one hand, we can analyze the history, political contexts, and rivalry that led scholars and reform Buddhists to emphasize some views and practices while rejecting others. We become wary of attempts to discard the constantly adapted practices and fluid pantheon of Theravada as we grow wise to agenda of exclusion and essentialism. In the case of the Buddhist pantheon, attempts – with varying degrees of success and failure – have been and continue to be made to exclude deities that can also be found in spirit religions, **animism**, and Hinduism. This is an agenda that relies on recent labels. The resulting categorization of these aspects of religious expression in the region is ahistorical. On the other hand, pragmatically we have to set ourselves some boundaries in order to limit even an inclusive study. One possible avenue is to define as Buddhist those practices that in some way make use of the Buddhist pantheon, Buddhist terminology, or the Buddhist Sangha (monastic community), but this immediately proves too narrow. Many rituals performed by Theravada Buddhists, such as those for fertility, childbirth, childhood, and female coming of age, make little reference to Buddhist doctrine, terms, or monks, but they shape the lives of Buddhists and may shape Buddhist ritual. Moreover, the rituals and practices of Buddhists are constantly reconfigured. This is very visibly true also of the pantheon. The Buddhist pantheon is a slow moving family of members, some similar, some disparate. While all nominally accept the Buddha as the head of the family, old members jostle with or welcome new arrivals, and it is not always the same who come and go, who form the heart of the action or stand at the sidelines. This book has not mastered these issues, but has tried to identify them where they impact each topic under consideration.

This book, then, explores the histories, texts, teachings, soteriological practices, social organizations, and rituals of Theravada, especially as found in Sri Lanka and mainland Southeast Asia. It touches on its aural and visual representations, and seeks to place what we see in its political context. In each chapter, a different aspect of Theravada is examined, with an eye to the continuities one may detect covered within the diversity that falls under the broad umbrella term of Theravada. Each chapter explores an aspect of how Theravada is defined by and is used to define the individuals and societies that accept it as an identifying label. The purpose of this book is to orient its readers such that they may contextualize any aspect of Theravada teaching, history, culture, or practice that they encounter. As such this book offers a broad overview. However, the book also aims to provide readers with sufficient detail that they are not taken unawares by the potentially bewildering array that makes up Theravada. This book therefore offers much detail to illustrate the great diversity of Theravada, historically and in the present, while suggesting how such details may relate to the overall picture. Of course, this book cannot cover every aspect or every angle, nor every historical turn taken, but it aims to map out sufficient highways and contours to make the reader's initial journey a smooth one. While seeking to err on the side of landmarks and highlights, the book also aims to draw the readers' attention to sufficient further guides for their own onward explorations.

The Structure of This Book and Its Use as a Coursebook

This book is structured to explore the historical and living expressions within Theravada following the tripartite framework of the three "refuges" that form the basic statement of a commitment to Buddhism. "I go to the Buddha for refuge" is explored in Chapters 1 and 2. The Dhamma (teaching) as a refuge forms the focus of Chapters 3–7. The Sangha (monastic community) as a refuge and the communities that create and support it are discussed in Chapters 8–12. While the book is neither a history nor an encyclopedic survey, it draws on diverse historical and geographical examples to explore these three refuges. This may lead to some odd juxtapositions as we move across centuries and between geographic regions at high speed. To make this less bewildering, most chapters are organized to some extent historically, looking at early and shared authorities on the topic in question first before looking at nuances and regional variations.

Within the section on the Sangha are three chapters dedicated to looking at women in Theravada (Chapters 9 and 10) and the potential of Theravada literature from a feminist perspective (Chapter 11). In reality, the topics included in these three chapters cut across the thematic divide even more than other chapters, but are included in the Sangha section because the possibilities of exploring them in any depth is thanks in large part to the heightened awareness of such matters generated by the debates concerning nuns and female power in recent decades. It is possible that dedicating three separate chapters to specifically female aspects of the religion is merely a continuation of the pattern of marginalization rather than inclusion: Why a dedicated section, why not complete integration? In reality, the overall bias of both primary and secondary sources, student interest in this topic, as well as the way certain types of marginalization have created separate patterns worthy of attention in their own right, mean that the topics warrant dedicated treatment in addition to the inclusion of a more balanced perspective in other chapters. The reverse bias, visibility neither through integration nor through focused attention, is so familiar in books on Theravada in general that it may strike only the sensitized reader as odd. The developments concerning nuns have come to a head since the publication of two earlier key textbooks that also combine textual, historical, and fieldwork material to give an account of Theravada Buddhism (Gombrich 1988 and Swearer 1995). While the developments are not so new – the successful reinstatement of the full nuns' lineage is fast approaching the adulthood of its twentieth anniversary – the antipathy of much of the male Sangha and, following their lead, lay society, particularly in mainland Southeast Asia, maintains public interest in this rebirth. I hope and anticipate that future books on the subject of Theravada will also pay greater attention to aspects of children and childhood. The section on the Sangha and the book as a whole closes with Chapter 12, which is on politics, for Theravada as we have it and see it has been shaped by, responded to, and taken an active role in the local, national, and international politics of the societies that it inhabits.

Twelve chapters correspond with the number of weeks in the semesters of some university systems. If a 10-week course is followed, then obvious candidates for merging are Chapter 4 with Chapter 3 and Chapter 11 with Chapter 10 (or to discard Chapter 11 as more theoretical than to do with historical or lived Theravada). Each chapter is also written to be accessible independently without the background provided in the preceding chapters and with cross-referencing throughout.

Other Studies of Theravada

Two previous overviews of Theravada have been important in the teaching of Buddhism in the English-speaking world. They are written with commendable clarity and complement each other in terms of coverage. They are Richard Gombrich's *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo* (1988) and Donald Swearer's *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* (1995). A recent addition to the topic that appeared as I was putting the finish touches to this work is Asanga Tilakaratne's *Theravada Buddhism: The View of the Elders* (2012). It pays far more attention to early teachings than the current book, before turning to how this relates to practice, particularly from a Sri Lankan perspective, while its later chapters examine regional variations in the main Theravada countries. In the same year, Peter Skilling *et al.* published a collection of articles by different authors on different aspects of Theravada identity under the title *How Theravada Is Theravada?* Like this book, it seeks to look beyond monolithic representations and claims about Theravada and makes important contributions about the invention of Theravada as a tradition.

In addition to recommending these four books, I would like to highlight some absences or weak points in this book. Given that this book seeks to convey Theravada's rich diversity, there is relatively little here on the detail of Theravada's varied pantheons of the divine and divinized, the mythological, legendary, deceased and living sources of power, protection, and identity. Books such as Strong (1992), Holt (2004 and 2009), and McDaniel (2011) can supply this gap. Strong's book relates the specifics of Buddhist practice and narrative on the ground to a distinctive textual history that allows us to question in close detail the representation of Theravada as a single, monolithic culture. Holt's works reveal the diversity of Theravada pantheons across regions while also looking at the politics of definition and essentialization that continue to shape modern Theravada. McDaniel's work explores Buddhism from the ground up, rather than imposing top-down categories. Other areas of this book that I would like to have represented in more specific detail are the artistic, textual, and aural worlds of Theravada. A linear history for any given country or region is also missing, and comparison with other forms of Buddhism is confined to very specific points. I have tried to make good for these absences with a short list of films, books, articles, and web resources at the end of each chapter. There is no attempt to be exhaustive about websites and films, for the website of the Theravada Civilisations Project established by Steven Collins and Juliane Schober, which is among those listed, aims to add and update such information regularly.

While I have drawn on as much published scholarship as I was able to, a great deal of the material and discussion in this book is also based on my own experience and research in Theravada texts and communities, some of which is not published elsewhere. I have also drawn on the discussions with friends and colleagues about their experience and research. The reader's patience is requested for the lack of published, citable material for some statements.

Revisiting Conceptions of Theravada

This section identifies how the approach taken here may differ from that found in other writings on the subject. The subtitle *Continuity, Diversity, and Identity* indicates my agenda in writing this book. I aim to discard the static model that treats Theravada as a dinosaur. Each

chapter, while addressing topics chosen to give an overview of key elements of Theravada, attempts to give some taste of that diversity and dynamism. Some pervasive stereotypes are challenged. The idea that Theravada Buddhists regard the Buddha as having been a mortal, human being and have eschewed the docetism and apotheosis of the founder found in other religions traditions, including other forms of Buddhism, is addressed in Chapter 1. The presence of the three paths of the *arhat, paccekabuddha*, and *bodhisatta/buddha* (in Sanskrit, the *śrāvakayāna, pratyekabuddhayāna*, and *(samyaksam)buddhayāna/bodhisattvayāna*) more commonly associated with the "Great Way," Mahayana (*mahā-yāna*), begins to draw our attention to the problematic nature of the equation of Theravada with *hīnayāna*. The idea that worship of the Buddha or of gods is not a core or orthodox component of Theravada is challenged in Chapter 2. The nature of the relationship between Pali and the Pali Canon and the Dhamma as actually accessed by Theravada Buddhists is explored in Chapters 3 and 4. The choices made by members of Theravada communities in their attempts to be good and dutiful Buddhists is explored in Chapter 5 in ways that question the use of the precepts as the primary guide to ethical or helpful conduct. The discussion takes into consideration ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity within the Theravada construction of appropriate and religious behavior. Chapter 6 looks at the dynamism of meditation, honed for centuries as humankind has developed its technologies of transformation, drawn on in the modern creation of Theravada identity and exported beyond the Buddhist framework. The historicity and changing dominance of practices is explored. Chapter 7 on *Abhidhamma*, Theravada philosophy and metaphysics, dismisses the notion that this is a minority, scholastic sideline, pointing rather to its widespread importance in defining beliefs and practice. The specifics of the *dhamma* theory, interdependent conditionality, and momentariness that characterize Theravada *Abhidhamma* again challenge the common equation of Theravada with *hīnayāna* and early Buddhism. Moreover, rather than remaining static, *Abhidhamma* continued to address philosophical, practical, and scientific developments. Chapter 8 provides an account of the place of Buddhist monasticism and monasteries within Theravada societies, which seeks to overturn stereotyping of Buddhist monks as "otherworldly" or "apolitical," yet acknowledges the Sangha's maintenance of ideals concerning *Nibbāna*, ethics and compassion. The common characterization of Theravada monks as focused on their personal path to liberation, in a theoretical contrast with the ideal of Mahayana monks and the role of the layperson, falls apart when one examines the extent to which monks and nuns' lives are shaped by their relationship to the communities in which they live and the services they provide for it. In spite of the rhetoric about continuity with the past and the purity of monastic lineage, it is observed that all of the current Theravada ordination lineages (*nikāya*) were established or defined relatively recently, since the mid-eighteenth century. In Chapter 9, the exploration of the history of and opportunities for nuns in Theravada pays attention to recent developments and how the deeply entrenched views on the subject in part arise because of Theravada's own, internal equation of its identity with that of early Buddhism. It begs questions of the identification of modern Theravada with historic sectarian difference in the pre-modern era and observes how patterns of centralized control and fear may be influencing decision-making in this area. Chapter 10 examines the theoretical and practical consequences arising from traditional notions of female versus male domains of power and the dominance of the male Sangha in Theravada institutional structures and religious expression. It draws attention to contrasting views concerning Theravada's role in providing a framework for egalitarianism or patriarchy. Chapter 11 is a theoretical chapter, which challenges a pervasive assumption that Theravada lacks the symbols and models of value to women that feminists have been able to find in Mahayana

literature. At the same time, it questions the actual worth of such symbols in the light of their androcentric transmission. Chapter 12 addresses the interdependency between Theravada as lived religion and the small and large-scale politics of the societies that embody it. While the relationship between macro-politics and Theravada has been a theme much examined in sociological studies in the West, it may still come as a surprise to those whose previous study has focused on doctrine. The events of the post-world war era, particularly since the 1970s and 1980s, forced scholars within Theravada to consider the subject not only of Buddhist politics but of Buddhist violence (or violence perpetrated by Buddhists). The chapter also touches on a theme rarely explicit in either scholarship or insider rhetoric, namely, the micro-politics that shapes the daily lives of Buddhists, including monks and nuns. The stereotype of Theravada monks as divorced from such issues is hard to maintain.

This book, then, seeks nuance in the representation of Theravada. It aims to overturn a picture of it as static and monolithic to better describe the richness within Theravada and more closely represent the texture of the religion on the ground. While one might assume such attention to detail would be welcome to those thus represented, the opposite may in fact be the case. For, the stereotypes of Theravada as early and of monks as otherworldly serve a number of purposes within modern Theravada identities. The stereotype of Theravada as early, for example, authorizes claims to authenticity and superiority, claims which are tools in competition for power, control, or patronage at the local, national, and global level. This in turn generates an impressive living tradition of in-depth scholarship and hermeneutics concerning and building on canonical and commentarial literature in a classical language spanning over two millennia. The stereotype of monks as otherworldly keeps within reach and mind important ideals easily lost if one gauges all value in terms of GDP or personal advancement. On the other hand, the stereotype also serves those who would control and limit the effectiveness of the relatively large body of men that makes up the Sangha and the women who would add to their number in all those societies where Theravada is part of the national identity.

Geographical Terms

It is anachronistic to speak about historical Buddhism using modern geographical terms. In this book I nonetheless use modern state names even when talking about the past, unless I am writing about something that requires a differentiation between earlier centers of power. Thus, I refer to Mahinda arriving in Sri Lanka in the third century BCE, by which I mean the island that was only to acquire that name in 1972. Similarly, I refer to Thailand, rather than Siam or Ayutthaya, unless, for example, I am talking about the transition between Ayutthaya, Thonburi, and Bangkok as capitals. In the same vein, I follow the anachronistic practice of using "India," "Indian," and "Indic" to refer to the South Asian subcontinent and aspects of its history, religion, and culture, a practice common among classical Indologists who focus on the study of the culture of the subcontinent in the period most relevant to Buddhist history. As still widespread, I use the former name "Union of Burma," "Burma" in short, for the country officially renamed Myanmar.

There are ways in which Theravada practice relates to the broader approach to religion, healing, and social interaction of the different ethnic groups who define themselves as Theravada Buddhists. Some of the patterns also reflect historical dynamics and broader Indic or other cultural influences. We can see strong affinities, for example, between Arakanese and

Burmese Buddhism, and between Shan, Thai, and Lao Buddhism, and we can see other, less strong affinities, between Arakanese-Burmese Buddhism and Sri Lankan Buddhism, and between Shan, Thai, Lao, and Cambodian Buddhism. When writing about broad patterns I several times refer to "Tai-Lao" Buddhism. I use the term "Tai" to include the related groups of the Tai ethnic family, including the Shan of Burma and the various Tai groups of southern China, in contrast to the "Thais" of the modern nation-state of Thailand. (We can see this distinction elsewhere in scholarship, for example where the term "Thai-Lao" is used to refer to those of the Lao ethnic group resident in northern Thailand (Hayashi 2003: 1).) Another example of a regional pattern is the "calling of the spirits," a practice to recall the 32/19 spirits that belong to the human body, that is common to the various Tai–Lao–Khmer ethnic groups including the various branches of the Shan. I thus also occasionally refer to Tai–Lao–Khmer practices, to include the Khmer, who are mainly based in Cambodia and the Kampuchea Krom region of Vietnam. In modern Sri Lanka, Buddhist religion has become associated with the ethnic Sinhalese majority, even though historically Buddhism in the country was also practiced by Tamil-speakers. Even in the modern period non-Sinhalese may participate in Buddhist activities and events. I use the phrase "Sinhala Buddhism" to distinguish the Buddhism of the island from elsewhere without intending any historic prejudice in this regard. I make some broad distinctions between practice in mainland Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, for example when discussing temporary versus lifelong ordination and attitudes to female power.

Non-English Terms, Text Titles, Transliteration, and Translation

The non-English technical terms given in this book for Buddhist concepts are in Pali, the sacred language of all current forms of Theravada, unless explicitly indicated otherwise or dictated by the specific context. On occasion this means that I use a Pali word, *kamma*, and the "Buddhist hybrid English" neologism *kammic*, where the Sanskrit-based terms *karma* and *karmic* have already entered the English language. I use the Pali Asoka, rather than the Sanskritic Aśoka or common transliteration Ashoka. A number of terms and phrases have become standard in the English used when referring to Buddhist practice but that may appear as incomprehensible jargon to the newcomer. The phrases "three refuges" and "taking the refuges" refer to a statement of faith or commitment to the three ideals/institutions that character Buddhism. These three refuges are the Buddha (spiritually enlightened religious founder of Buddhism), Dhamma (the teaching of the Buddha), and the Sangha (the Buddhist monastic community). The word precept refers to the various principles that Buddhists may choose to aspire to live to (rather than to rules prescribed from earlier). They are formulated as vows (in sets of 5, 8, or 10, see Chapter 5) and so the phrase "taking the precepts" means to make a statement of commitment to live by these principles. The phrase "merit-making" refers to the practice of consciously undertaking good deeds, and thus building up the benefits of good deeds (merit) that will have a beneficial effect on one's future. The phrases "transferring merit" and "merit-transference" refers to the act of sponsoring or performing good deeds on behalf of others, usually either the recently deceased or "all living beings," that is, the world as a whole. Part of the ritual that attends merit-transference is the naming of the beneficiary who may then benefit by becoming conscious of the good act being performed on their behalf, this positive consciousness itself then being considered a meritorious act (see Chapter 5). Buddhist monks are addressed and

referred to with a number of honorifics. I confess I have been inconsistent in my use of these, often adopting the use of followers of specific individuals, for example, "Ledi *Sayadaw*" or "The Ledi *Sayadaw*," "*Phra* Payutto," "*Luang Pho* Sot," "Soma *Thera*," "*Ajan* Brahm," but elsewhere I use Pali ordinations names with or without the English "Venerable / Ven."

For Pali terms, the transliteration follows that of the Critical Pali Dictionary (Smith 1948). Other languages that appear in this book include Sanskrit and some of the regional languages of Theravada. The transliteration used often follows those in the sources referred to in the relevant section, although in some cases a standard system, such as the Royal Thai General System of Transcription for Thai, or, for Shan, a transliteration currently being trialed by the Bodleian Libraries, Oxford. Burmese words have been simplified and, where there is a standard English transliteration, it is used, as in the case of the names of many Sayadaws (not transcribed as *hsayadaw*) connected with meditation. Diacritics are used to represent the larger number of consonants and vowels in Pali and Sanskrit. There are exceptions for words that have become commonly used in English, such as Theravada, Mahayana, and Sangha. There are Pali terms that also occur in vernacular languages and it can be difficult to judge which transcription system to use. Sometimes the meaning is different in and even between vernaculars. One such term is ***ācariya*** (Pali), which means teacher and often occurs in the Pali Canon to refer to the teacher of, for example, meditation to a more junior monk in contrast to the ***upajjhāya***, who ordains the monk. In this book, we find it in Thai, where it is a term of address "teacher" more generally but also occurs associated with the names of monks, including those in the Ajan Chah Thai forest tradition. Because of the pronunciation in Thai of final –r as "n," it is sometimes transcribed as "*ajahn*" and in the Thai Royal transliteration system as *achan*. Here it is transliterated as Ajan, one of the two ways it is most commonly transliterated in association with the names of well-known teachers. In Khmer, the term as used here most commonly refers to the male lay specialists who help run temples and perform part of the services of a temple or of Buddhist rituals. So for Khmer the term is here transliterated as *achar*.

Names of texts tend to be divided up for ease of reading, for example, "the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*," not "the *Dhammacakkappavattanasutta*," and I use the term *sutta* even where the term *suttanta* tends to be used for *suttas* from the *Dīgha Nikāya*, for example, "*Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*" not "*Mahāparinibbāna Suttanta*." Usually references to texts are to translations by named authors. Where only the initials of the texts are given without further explanation, this is to the Pali Text Society edition, for example, "*Dīgha Nikāya* (DN ii.123ff.)" refers to volume 2 of the Pali Text Society edition, page 123 following.

In this book, the terms "temple" and "monastery" are used interchangeably because most monasteries also house the building or buildings that function as the temple. Relatively few temples are not within monasteries. One example is the Temple of the Tooth, whose management alternates between two monasteries located on opposite sides of the lake in central Kandy. There are also "pagoda," temple buildings that developed out of the earlier *stūpa*, funerary mounds. The English word pagoda is used where these are buildings that may be entered, for example, "The Shwedagon Pagoda" in Burma, or where it is common to refer to them by the word pagoda, for example, "The Silver Pagoda" in Cambodia, in contrast to Sanskrit-English *stūpa* (Pāli *thūpa*) for the architectural monuments that are closed, even though both traditionally house relics. There are some monasteries and abodes for individual monks and nuns that do not function as temples because they are used only by forest monks who have undertaken to refrain from the usual social duties of monks and dedicate themselves to meditation. Even though they may admit the presence of laypeople to some degree, they do not have the facilities for laypeople to perform their religious practices. The word

"Wat" has become familiar in English to refer to monastic temple complexes in Tai–Lao–Khmer regions and is used in this way here. However, when the same word is used in a longer technical term, it is transliterated using the standard transliteration for that language, even though the pronunciation is the same. Thus "Wat Uṇṇalom" is the name of the temple in Cambodia that is the official residence of Supreme Patriarch Thep Vong, but a layman who provides astrological advice, teaches novices, or officiates at temple rituals is a *"vat achar."*

I use the term "spirituality" to mean the aspiration to engage in practices that support oneself and/or others toward the aims of the soteriological path as well as other altruistic aspirations and conduct. I am not cynical of this as an important motivation in human behavior and thinking. I do not use the term "religiosity" for this, since that has a far broader coverage, nor do I use the phrase "personal transformation" since this could obscure altruistic service of others. The term soteriology here is also used beyond its more familiar Abrahamic context, to refer to the path to liberation, even if there is no savior ("soter") to take one there.

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Part One
Buddha

1

The Buddha and Buddhahood

Overview

The focus of this chapter is the enlightened being and teacher now generally known as "the Buddha." When distinguishing the Buddha of our era from other Buddhas of the past and future he is called **Gotama Buddha**. In exploring the life story and status of Gotama Buddha, we examine the religious and cultural background of early Buddhism and introduce some of the basic teachings and institutions of Theravada Buddhism. We shall examine the various ways in which the Buddha and Buddhahood was regarded and defined in Theravada Buddhism, how this developed, and how it contrasts with understandings of the Buddha in other branches of Buddhism and in the West. The chapter discusses how the Buddha is always seen as beyond human, the product of lifetimes of effort, and one example of those who realize the truth, rather than a unique, one-time occurrence. How his super-human status and character changes is examined in the light of the ways his portrayal accommodates the needs of different genres of canonical text. Such adaptation is also observed diachronically in later **Pali** and vernacular literature: notions of Buddhahood and omniscience developed and were more closely defined over time. Aspects of the biography and of biographical depictions of the Buddha are examined, including how these expand backward in time to include the earlier stages of the career of the Buddha-to-be (***bodhisatta***) in previous lifetimes and under former Buddhas, and extend forward, through his **relics** (***dhātu***) and images to inhabit the lands to which Theravada spread long after the Buddha's departure from life (his ***parinibbāna***).

Master of the Universe

A Buddha is the only type of being to have mastered the universe, the realm of rebirth, and is no longer subject to it. The living world in Buddhism is made up of humans, animals, and a whole host of nonhuman beings. There are multiple **hells** and heavens, a hierarchy of gods including the great, powerful gods of the Indian religious worldview, such as Brahmā, **Sakka** (Śakra / Indra in **Sanskrit**), the dominant gods of the **Vedic** period, and later Viṣṇu (in Sanskrit)

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and other gods of the Epic/purānic period. All these living beings, even the gods, are subject to the cycle of death and rebirth, ***saṃsāra***. When the merit acquired by those enjoying divine rebirths runs out, they will die, like other mortals. In the case of cosmologically significant gods, such as the king of the gods, Sakka, another being is reborn into the divine position as soon as it is vacated. Similarly, the demerit generated from the evil committed in former lifetimes by hell-beings will eventually run out, and they will be able to move on from hell. This view that good actions create a store of merit that leads to good experiences and rebirths (as fortunate humans and deities) and that bad actions create a store of demerit that leads to bad experiences and rebirths (as unfortunate humans, animals, and hell-beings) underlies much Buddhist religious behavior, which aims at "making merit," that is, performing good action. Such meritorious activity is also an important part of the path to becoming a Buddha. Since a Buddha has destroyed the unwholesome (***akusala***) mental states that underlie bad actions, a Buddha's conduct is inherently good. What is meant by good and bad action is looked at in more detail later and in Chapter 5.

Although in Buddhism, unlike in monotheistic religions, gods cannot offer salvation to humans, they are often portrayed as supportive of the Buddha and as helping to make his teaching, the **Dhamma**, which is salvific, available to others. But it is only a human being who experiences a sufficient balance of freedom and suffering to aspire to leave *saṃsāra* completely. It is only a Buddha who has found and put an end to this cycle. He (and it is always a he) has attained ***Nibbāna*** "Enlightenment," the literal connotations of which are both "bliss" and "extinction." Other terms for the Buddha's liberation include ***bodhi***/*sambodhi* "Awakening," *amata*, the deathless state – immortality in the sense of freedom from death, but not the retention of life – and *sabbaññutā* "Omniscience." Not only is the Buddha no longer subject to rebirth, he also has extraordinary powers, powers of cognition and of physical ability.

The power of the Buddha's mastery over *saṃsāra* can then be drawn on by his followers, not just for spiritual guidance but also for worldly matters. It is possible for other humans to gain individual Enlightenment, and freedom from *saṃsāra*, but only when a Buddha is accessible to make the Dhamma (teaching) available. This individual Enlightenment is called "arhatship" and an individual so enlightened an "*arhat*." There is another type of enlightened being according to Buddhism. The ***paccekabuddha*** "solitary Buddha," attains *Nibbāna* but, unlike the Buddha, does not make the Dhamma available for others. (For a discussion of *paccekabuddha* in the **canon**, see Anālayo 2010: 11ff.) The Dhamma, the "truth" or "teaching," is eternal, in that it expresses "the way things really are." It takes a Buddha to realize this truth. The further we are from the lifetime of the Buddha the harder it becomes to access the Dhamma, until eventually the world descends into an apocalypse. After this a new world order evolves and a new Buddha can arrive.

Each Buddha's quest had lasted many hundreds of lifetimes, his success predicted in the presence of previous Buddhas. The Buddha of our era is Siddhattha Gotama, who is described in Buddhist narratives as being born into a royal family in northern India in circa. sixth- to fourth-century BCE. For non-Buddhists, Gotama is spoken of as the "historical" Buddha, that is, founder of the religion that became Buddhism, whereas the preceding Buddhas are regarded as mythological. For Buddhists he is one in a line of Buddhas. Theravada Buddhism dates the death (*parinibbāna*) of Gotama Buddha to 218 years before the consecration of the **Emperor Asoka** of north India. Traditionally the *parinibbāna* has been dated to the year 544/543 BCE and that is the year that the "Buddhist Era" of Theravada dating begins. To convert "Buddhist Era" to Common Era (CE), in the dates of publications, for example, we