

INTRODUCTION

John Clifford Holt and Jacob N. Kinnard

Religious experience is, by definition, a profoundly personal and individual matter; it is, however, always also a communal experience. There is no escape from this fundamental recognition. On the one hand, even the most private, contemplative, esoteric, or otherworldly mystical religious experiences are necessarily temporally conditioned; that is, they occur within historical and, therefore, cultural contexts. On the other hand, all normative social constructions of reality are, ultimately, individually mediated; that is, all culturally shared conceptions of religion are apprehended as instances of personal consciousness. Thus, the personal and social natures of religion and religious experience are inextricably intertwined. Taking this as a fundamental premise, the essays in this volume address the topic of how community functions within Theravāda Buddhist culture by focusing on the ways in which the historical, social, and philosophical dynamics of various Buddhist communities have helped to forge particular apprehensions and conceptions of personal religious meaning and identity that are, at the same time, collective and social.

Although many historians and anthropologists of religion have from both the theoretical and the culture-specific perspectives explicitly addressed the question of what makes a religious community, the issue remains a vexing one. We frequently talk, for instance, of *the* Buddhist tradition, in the singular, to describe an entity that transcends doctrinal differences and cuts across both physical and temporal borders. In contrast, it is almost nonsensical to talk about a single Buddhist community; how, for instance, could we meaningfully talk about a community that encompasses the Sri Lankan fire walker, the Thai collector of amulets, and the Californian meditator? However, we do talk

about *Buddhist* communities, as the smaller entities that make up *the* Tradition. But what about these groups makes them specifically Buddhist? How do different and often disparate communities constitute themselves as Buddhist? And despite their disparities, in what ways are they linked by one shared tradition? How do they communicate this shared identity?

The basic premise of this volume is that communities are not organically occurring entities, but that they are, as Benedict Anderson has persuasively argued about all communities, imagined; as such, they are in a constant state of flux, being rethought and reformed—reconstituted—in response to the flow of specific historical events. The essays in this volume, then, explore the dynamics of this imagining, by looking at who has produced Theravāda discourses and practices in South and Southeast Asia, and why and how the discourses and practices have shaped the identities and characters of the communities of Buddhists in this region. Certainly, the most obvious Buddhist community is the sangha, but this book attempts to push beyond the confines of the monastic community, and to consider a variety of communities—both lay and monastic, and their varied interactions.

Thus, from a variety of perspectives—historical, doctrinal and philosophical, social and anthropological—the authors of the chapters that make up this volume explore the types of issues that have proven important and definitive for identifying what it has meant, individually and socially, to be Buddhist in a plethora of ways within a variety of contexts in South and Southeast Asia. Each individual essay, and the volume as a whole, is informed by a single basic question: how have various Buddhists in South and Southeast Asian cultural contexts constituted communities within which explicitly Buddhist qualities and values have been personally affirmed?

Jonathan Walters's lead chapter in this volume addresses this central question by drawing our attention to how perceived dynamics of karma, a bedrock assumption operating creatively in the lives of all Buddhist adherents, are thought to sustain and alter the nature of specific social relations between given individuals over several lifetimes. That is, he points out how it is not uncommon for the Buddhists he has known in contemporary, village Sri Lanka to assert that karma is responsible for why and how they are related to their siblings, parents, or friends, and how their actions in the present will determine the nature of these same relations in future lives. What Walters is pointing out is that karma need not be understood exclusively as an inexorable cosmic law that works only on the level of determining an individual person's present and future state of conditioning. Karma, moreover, is also thought to function socially or collectively among or between various individuals. The karma of one individual may affect, or be in confluence with, the karma of another. Further, families, castes, villages, and even nations may

have collective karma. Walters refers to these phenomena as “sociokarma.” While reviewing the work of an earlier scholar who had previously examined the idea of collective karma and had come to the conclusion that it was a modern aberration of Buddhist doctrine and culture, Walters proceeds to analytical studies of the *Jātakas*, the *Buddhavaṃsa*, the *Anāgatavaṃsa*, and the *Apadāna* to find that instances of several different types of sociokarma are clearly instantiated. The essay is extremely rich in its implications. For instance, it has been held that Buddhists believe that consciousness is what transmigrates as a result of karma from one rebirth to another. Usually this is taken to explain how an individual’s identity and conditioned context has arisen. But Walters’s essay makes it clear that there is a particular strain of Buddhist thought that understands that the very nature of social relations, or the very condition of a particular community, can transmigrate. That is, communities are constituted by karma.

John Strong’s essay focuses on a neglected aspect of Buddhist community: queenship. He argues that in ancient India, kingship was really something of a family affair with the chief queen playing key roles in a type of power-sharing arrangement with the king. That is, her role of leadership with the community was part and parcel of a sociopolitical dynamic in which “her rule and authority [was] part of a greater symbiosis of power and performance.” By examining the profile of Asandhimittā, the chief queen of Aśoka, as it can be gleaned through a study of the extended Cambodian *Mahāvamsa*, the Pāli *Dasavaṃsthuppakaraṇa*, and the Thai *Trai Phum* (translated by Frank and Mani Reynolds), Strong points out that just like kingship, queenship must be earned through the generation of karmic merit, that it may be constituted by a dual nature (“righteous” yet “fierce”), that a queen’s karmic merit must also be accompanied by the cultivation of wisdom, and that, just like kings, queens were very active in the public promulgation of the Buddha’s dharma. What he finds in this study, therefore, is that not only are the nature of kingship and queenship co-extensive, but that they are consubstantial, symbiotic, and mutually dependent as well.

Liz Wilson has focused on Pāli and *Mūlasarvāstivādin* literature which depicts how the *dhūtaṅga* master of asceticism, Mahākassapa (Sanskrit Mahākasyapa) was especially inclined to receive alms from impoverished and unfortunate lay donors who were in dire need of merit to transform their conditions. She argues that in consuming the “bio-moral” status of depraved givers, Mahākassapa, as a highly desirable field of merit, has engaged in a form of sacrifice, or in “monastic begging as a means of unburdening others of negative karmic conditions.” Historically, this dynamic between desperate laity and highly virtuous monk appears to be a transformation of the Vedic pattern constituting the patron/priest relation, a kind of “Buddhist moral sacrificial

altar in the post Vedic age.” Moreover, she argues, it is really a form of “demerit transfer,” a religious practice reflecting socioreligious relations constitutive of “karmic communities of interdependence.”

Julie Gifford’s study strikes a similar chord in showing how the religious practice of a Buddhist saint is seen to benefit the spiritual conditions of a needy laity. In focusing on one of the Buddha’s most venerated disciplines, Mahāmoggallāna, she demonstrates how Theravāda cosmology can be regarded as the product of particular visionary experiences. That is, Mahāmoggallāna’s “meditation facilitates the deployment of supernatural powers” which become the basis for his knowledge used in constructing “a cosmological map of samsara.” According to the *Vimānavatthu* commentary, Mahāmoggallāna relates his visionary experiences of the various realms of the cosmos to the Buddha, who, in turn, incorporates them into his teachings about suffering, karmic retribution, and the transformative power of the dharma. Gifford argues that karma is understood in this context as inherently social, insofar as the karma of one person affects the totality of all members of the community. It is for this reason alone that the Mahāmoggallāna’s cosmological insights, derived from his meditative attainments, are made available compassionately through the teaching of the Buddha’s dharma. Everyone has a stake in the spiritual quality of the community as a whole.

Jacob Kinnard’s essay answers the question of how the worshipping community at Bodhgayā (Bihar, India), the historical pilgrimage site associated with the Buddha’s enlightenment experience, has been transformed over the past century from being a cultic community comprised almost exclusively of *Vaiṣṇava* and *Śaiva* Hindus to its present polyvalent constituency of Buddhists from all over Asia. Kinnard reviews the fascinating legal history of how Buddhists demanded, in colonial courts under British imperial rule, that Hindus “return” the “Buddhist Jesuslam” to its “rightful” Buddhist heritage. This Buddhist demand, headed by the Sinhala Buddhist Anagarika Dharmapala, occurred only after at least a four hundred year occupancy by *Śaiva* brahmins who regularly conducted rites in the Bodhgayā temple for *Vaiṣṇava* pilgrims who regarded the Buddha as Viṣṇu’s ninth avatar. Kinnard’s study registers how *Śaivas*, Buddhists, *Vaiṣṇavas*, and “All-Indian nationalists” have attempted to constitute their respective communities in staking their rival claims to this sacred site. It is a classic study of the manner in which communities define themselves in relation to each other.

John Holt’s study of the contemporary Viṣṇu controversy in Sri Lanka analyzes the processes by which aspects (worship of Viṣṇu) of one religious tradition (Hindu) have been assimilated, subordinated, and legitimated by another (Sinhala Theravāda Buddhist). He argues that assimilations of this

nature are often the product of political expediency rather than the result of doctrinal innovations, the latter of which are usually post hoc formulations. He finds the same processes at work in the current monastic-led drive to purge Sinhala Buddhist culture of deity propitiation, especially deities of Hindu origin. While this attempt to extract veneration of deities is made publicly on doctrinal grounds, Holt finds that political pressures brought about by rising ethnic consciousness within the context of Sri Lanka's protracted civil war between Tamils and Sinhalese has been a salient factor in pumping the impulse for reform. That is, ethnicity, rather than doctrinal purity, is sometimes a driving force in the process of reconstituting the substance of religious community.

Anne Blackburn's chapter "addresses questions about the processes through which new Buddhist communities come to be localized and accepted as natural." Specifically, she illustrates how an eighteenth-century Theravāda monastic lineage from Thailand was imported to Sri Lanka and legitimated by various strategies, including the translation of important Pāli texts into the Sinhala vernacular and by emphasizing monastic forest-dwelling legacies regarded with great respect by the Buddhist laity. She then briefly looks at similar patterns of localization strategies in twelfth-century Pagan (Burma) and in sixteenth-century northern Thailand.

Mahinda Deegalle's contribution is concerned with the emergence of new forms of monastic sermonizing in Sri Lanka and Thailand in the late twentieth century. In particular, he notes how *baṇa kavi* (poetic sermons) have become a popular means of preaching the dharma to the laity by innovative monks who are trying to present the dharma in new, culturally attractive fashions suitable to the contemporary age, especially youth. One of the important issues that he raises is that music and song have been regarded traditionally in the Theravāda *Vinaya* monastic disciplinary code as offences to be avoided. Therefore, the monks who have engaged in this new form of preaching are now trying "to constitute a sense of community and religious affiliation as they struggle against the established normative monastic authorities." In his sketch of how two monks (one Sinhalese and one Thai) have mounted their campaigns, Deegalle argues that the roots of *baṇa kavi* are actually founded upon an existing medieval Sinhala literary poetic tradition from the fifteenth-century Kōṭṭē period.

Carol Anderson has studied the significance of the *Buddha Āhilla*, a practical and popular guide or compendium of instructions for how Buddhists should engage in cultic activities such as *sil*, the chanting of *pirit*, *bodhi pūjas*, or other forms of religious activity at Buddhist *vihārayas*. She points out that the text has a definite iconic value for many lay Buddhists, is often presented

as a gift to adolescent Buddhists on *Vesak poya* days, and has remained a standard handbook since it originally appeared in the late nineteenth century. Since the *Buddha Āhilla*, in its many recensions, constitutes a practical liturgical guide for engaging in traditional forms of lay ritual, Anderson rejects categorizing the text as part of the “Protestant Buddhism” type of religiosity which other scholars have declared as the dominant form of lay Buddhist religious piety during this particular historical time frame. Whatever the origins of its inspiration, the *Buddha Āhilla* has iconic value not only to nostalgic Buddhists, but for students of Buddhism seeking to gain a profile of how the Buddhist community has understood the form and function of “congregational” life in modern Sri Lanka.

James Egge’s chapter examines “how Buddhists view the qualities of the Buddha that are mundane, physical, impermanent, royal and auspicious in relation to those that are transcendent, immaterial, permanent, ascetic and pure.” His method is to consider the nature of the sacred marks of the Buddha body as “signs capable of pointing to both mundane and transcendent aspects.” By “signs,” Egge is referring to the heuristic devices deployed by Charles S. Peirce as icon, index, and symbol. He adopts them here for the purpose of his own analysis. In his study, Egge concludes that these signs actually mean nothing in and of themselves, but are dependent upon “interpretive communities” for the meanings they acquire. He points out, that is, that “a text is meaningless without an interpretive community, and without imagined interpretive communities, there are no historical meanings.”

The discerning reader will find the spirit and intellectual orientations of Frank Reynolds throughout the contents of the various essays constituting this volume. That is hardly a surprising fact: all of the contributors to this collection were, at one time, students of Frank Reynolds at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. All of these essays are reflective of Reynolds’s various buddhological, theoretical, and methodological interests. Reynolds’s approach has been almost always dialogic or collaborative in nature; his method has usually been one of conversation, and his wide interests have spanned concerns for the self on the one hand to concerns of the cosmic dimension of religion on the other, from the classical to the popular, and from the political to the contemplative. His vision has always been to seek a plurality of voices speaking to a common problem of importance. It is therefore fitting that this collection of essays dedicated to him is thoroughly a collaborative work containing a plurality of voices focused on a common problem of fundamental importance to the understanding of Buddhism per se and the history of religions in general.

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College in York, Maine, to honor Frank Reynolds as our teacher extraordinaire and to thank him warmly and genuinely for the great compassionate influence he has exercised upon all of our professional and personal lives.

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