

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: BEYOND SUPERSTITION

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RELICS HAVE ARRIVED IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND, IN PARTICULAR, IN Buddhist studies. This can be seen, for example, in the 1998 publication of *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* by the University of Chicago Press. Whatever one might say about the list of terms that made the final cut of twenty-two, the fact that it included an essay on relics by Gregory Schopen, a scholar of Buddhism, is noteworthy.¹ It is fair to say, I think, that thirty years ago this would have been unimaginable. Relic veneration was of course well known as a salient feature of Christianity, especially in western Europe during the Middle Ages, but the identification of relics as a key category for the study of religion more generally reflects major interpretive shifts in both religious studies and the study of Buddhism.

To be sure, relics have not been completely invisible in broad comparative surveys written in the first half of the twentieth century. For example, in the early nineteen hundreds, J. A. MacCulloch devoted nine double-columned pages to the practice in “primitive” and Western traditions in his essay for James Hastings’ *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (1919). But after tracing the phenomenon from its “savage” forms through Greek religion and into the history of Christianity, he concluded: “The admitted great uncertainty which surrounds any relics, the certainty of impudent fraud in the case of many, the gross superstitions and abuses to which they have given rise and which have attended the cult from early times, far outweigh any positive good which they may ever have done.”²

Vincent Smith’s much briefer survey of relics in Eastern religions that follows immediately after MacCulloch’s essay begins rather than ends with his personal assessment of relic worship:

The treasuring of relics as memorials or souvenirs of the dead is a natural exhibition of emotion to which no objection can be taken, but, when the relics are believed to possess intrinsic magical properties, the veneration of them passes into rank superstition, open to every kind of abuse and fraud. The transition from the sentimental to the superstitious veneration of relics invariably takes place in all countries, so that the innocent sentiment is forgotten while the superstition develops a vast mythology.³

Both MacCulloch and Smith found it appropriate to evaluate normatively beliefs and practices centered on relics, and both concluded that relics, on the whole, tend to do much more harm than good. It is also significant that both scholars, in disparaging relic veneration, employed “superstition,” a word that contemporary scholars of religion tend to eschew, at least in their published reflections. The connotations of the category “superstition,” and the shift in interpretive perspectives that has led to its abandonment as a legitimate analytical term, merit further consideration here, since they reveal a good deal about the circumstances that gave rise to this book on Buddhist relic veneration and the shift in scholarly orientation to which it contributes.

The etymology of *superstitio*, the Latin word from which the English *superstition* derives, is a matter of some debate, and scholarly attention has recently focused on uses of the word by both pagan and Christian writers in the centuries before and after the rise of the Christian movement. Michele Salzman provides an overview of the etymological discussion, noting that scholars have identified a range of early meanings of the term, including “a state of religious exaltation,” the posture of one standing over a defeated opponent, and the condition of one who has survived an event and become a witness, all of which can be derived from the basic sense of “standing over.”⁴

By the first century BCE, the word had developed strong negative connotations and was employed to criticize “excessive fear or awe of the gods” or “an unreasonable religious belief.”⁵ The term eventually gained juridical force, and Christianity was persecuted as a *superstitio*. While scholars disagree about the precise reasons for Christian persecution, L. F. Janssen notes that Christianity was seen as an affront to the Roman social order in several respects. By seeking an individual salvation that superseded familial and social bonds, and by refusing to venerate the gods that ensured the integrity and longevity of Roman society, Christians marked themselves as a community apart, one easily seen as subversive.⁶ During the fourth-century Christianization of the Roman Empire, ‘*superstitio*,’ while consistently used to critique the beliefs and

practices of those beyond the pale of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, was interpreted differently by pagans and Christians. As Salzman observes, “pagans used and defined *superstitio* with its traditional meaning—irrational or excessive religious awe, credulity, divination, magic—but their Christian contemporaries used *superstitio* to mean the morally incorrect beliefs of pagans.”⁷ When the authority of the Christian church was more securely established at the end of the fourth and early fifth centuries, ‘*superstitio*’ was used in the Theodosian Code to legislate against pagans, Jews, and Christian heretics.⁸

As this brief overview suggests, ‘superstition’ meant different things to different people in antiquity. What remained constant was the use of the word to mark and defend communal boundaries. Those deemed superstitious were liable to exclusion, either because of disordered affections or cognitive error. Thus a person or group could be branded superstitious both because of an excess of emotion and for attaching a laudable emotion to the wrong object. In early English-language usage, the term was frequently employed by Protestant reformers to characterize Catholic clerics and the rituals over which they officiated. For example, in Thomas Norton’s 1561 translation of Calvin’s *Institutes*, the great reformer asks: “Shall we denie that it is a superstitious worshipping, when men do throwe themselues downe before bread, to worship Christe therein?”⁹ In this instance, Catholics are criticized for misdirecting their commendable devotional sentiments. Instead of attaching them to Christ, their appropriate object, they direct them to the eucharistic bread, falsely believing that Christ is somehow directly and materially present in the consecrated host. Here the problem is cognitive: for Calvin there are neither biblical nor epistemological grounds for worshipping the communion bread.

In the context of Reformation polemics such as this, ‘superstition’ is employed to distinguish between false and true religion, thus defining membership in the community of the faithful. In the eighteenth century, those espousing Enlightenment ideals used the term to criticize religious belief and practice more broadly. In this latter context, strong emotion could be seen as intrinsically harmful to the exercise of human reason, with the disciplines of science and philosophy providing the most effective remedy. Thus Adam Smith, commenting on the importance of public education in a well-ordered state, observes in his *Wealth of Nations*: “Science is the great antidote to the poison of enthusiasm and superstition; and where all the superior ranks of people were secured from it, the inferior ranks could not be much exposed to it.”¹⁰ David Hume likewise warns of the dangers of enthusiasm and superstition, both of which he attributes to

human emotions and ignorance, but he also identifies a key difference between the two. Superstition, in contrast to enthusiasm, is much more favorable to the rise of “priestly power.” He notes: “As superstition is a considerable ingredient in almost all religions, even the most fanatical; there being nothing but philosophy able entirely to conquer these unaccountable terrors; hence it proceeds, that in almost every sect of religion there are priests to be found: But the stronger the mixture there is of superstition, the higher the authority of the priesthood.”¹¹ In these Enlightenment critiques of superstition, we see the emergence of another community, one critical of religious belief, emotion, and practice in general and in search of rational explanations for “superstitious” religious behavior. Once again, ‘superstition’ serves to mark those outside the community. In this case the criterion of membership is not some particular form of religion but instead is a commitment to a rational and empirical mode of inquiry.

The modern community of scholars standing within this tradition of Enlightenment thought forms the immediate context for understanding why Buddhist relic veneration has until the last fifteen years or so received scant attention from scholars of religion. Nineteenth-century scholarship on Buddhism tended to minimize the important role that relic veneration played in the history of Buddhist traditions throughout Asia or, when it was noted, to represent it as evidence of the popularization and decline of the Buddha’s original teachings. This narrative of popularization and decline finds vivid expression in the writing of T. W. Rhys Davids, an early scholar of Buddhism whose work was very influential, among both academics and the broader public.¹² Writing a century ago in the *North American Review*, Rhys Davids draws upon the image of the Hindu festival of Jagannatha in Puri to illustrate the decline of the Buddha’s teaching under the force of popular superstition. Noting the forgotten heritage of Buddhist teaching in the region, he contrasts the philosophical and ethical purity of early Buddhist teaching with what he regards as the devotional excesses of Hinduism. Where Buddhist teaching counsels self-restraint and nonviolence, the cult of Jagannatha whips up a frenzy of devotional fervor that sometimes results in the death of pious devotees who throw themselves beneath the wheels of the gigantic processional chariots in the hopes of liberation. He writes:

When we call to mind how the frenzied multitudes, drunk with the luscious poison of delusions, from which the reformation they had rejected might have saved them, dragged on that sacred car, heavy and hideous

with carvings of obscenity and cruelty—dragged it on in the very name of Jagan-natha, the forgotten teacher of self-control, of enlightenment and of universal love, while it creaked and crushed over the bodies of miserable suicides, the victims of once exploded superstitions—it will help us to realize how heavy is the hand of the immeasurable past; how much more powerful than the voice of the prophets is the influence of congenial fancies, and of inherited beliefs.¹³

Here, the linkage between emotional excess and superstition comes to the fore, as Rhys Davids mourns the decline in rationality that, in his view, attended the adoption of Buddhism by the great emperor Aśoka in the third century BCE under whose patronage Buddhism expanded and gained broader popular influence, a time he characterizes as “the beginning of the end.” Drawing a parallel between the broad historical trajectories of Christianity and Buddhism after they were adapted to the needs of empire and their membership expanded exponentially, he depicts the decline as inevitable. Like many other nineteenth-century scholars of Buddhism, he also compares Buddhism with Hinduism. Where Buddhism is for him, at least in its original form, characterized by rational analysis and emotional restraint, Hinduism is marked by ritual and displays of emotion. Such comparisons contributed to the tendency to downplay the role of devotion and ritual in early, “authentic” Buddhism.

Rhys Davids concludes his survey of Buddhism on a more positive note, however, pointing to signs of a Buddhist revival in Asia, particularly in Sri Lanka (then called Ceylon), a revival connected to the recovery of the authentic Buddhist textual tradition. This revival was in part a response to attacks on Buddhism disseminated through an active campaign of Christian missionary propaganda. Segments of both the lay and monastic communities in Ceylon took up the challenge and, beginning in the 1860s, began to publish their own literature to rebut Christian attacks on Buddhist teachings.¹⁴ The conflict also gave rise to a series of widely publicized debates between Buddhist monks and missionaries, one of which drew the attention of Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, one of the founders of the Theosophical Society. Olcott played a formative role in efforts to establish a system of Buddhist education, and the curriculum in these schools was deeply influenced by European and American representations of Buddhism dependent upon textually based reconstructions of the Buddha’s original teachings. Rhys Davids writes:

Books in manuscript, on the time-honored palm leaves, had been deemed enough when their position was not attacked. Now they are

printing and circulating their books, as the Christians do; they are founding schools for both sexes; they are establishing boards of education, even high schools and colleges; and their sacred books, no longer left only in the hands of student recluses, are printed and circulated at large. . . .

On the other hand, the labors of European and American scholars are making accessible, also on this side, the ancient texts, and are even beginning to translate them in to European languages, and to analyze and summarize their contents. Though the Buddhists do not in the least agree with us, whose aim is not controversial at all, but only historical, they are beginning not only to make such use as suits them of our results, but to imitate our methods.¹⁵

We can see an analogous disparagement of Buddhist ritual in contrast to supposedly more authentic forms of Buddhism in the work of Paul Carus, who, like Rhys Davids, had a powerful influence on popular views of Buddhism in Europe and North America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Carus' interest in Buddhism was greatly stimulated by the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, a forum in which representatives of Buddhism, including the charismatic Sri Lankan Buddhist reformer Anagarika Dharmapala and the Japanese Rinzai Zen master Soyen Shaku, addressed overflowing audiences who knew little of the complexity and diversity of Buddhist traditions. Carus, who held a doctorate in classical philology from the University of Tübingen, never held a university position; he was, however, a prolific author whose writings, especially his *Gospel of Buddhism*, exercised a great influence in the United States and abroad.¹⁶ While Carus never formally converted to Buddhism, he found its teachings in large part consonant with the evolving "science of religion" that he advocated. In addition to popularizing Buddhist teachings through his own writings, he published the work of many Buddhists under the auspices of the Open Court Publishing Company and in *The Open Court*, the journal he edited, which aimed at "conciliating Religion with Science."¹⁷ He also maintained an extensive correspondence with Buddhists in Asia and materially supported their missionizing in the United States.¹⁸

Carus' correspondence with the Sri Lankan monk and Sanskritist, the Venerable Alutgama Seelakkhandha, illuminates the distinctive character of his personal enthusiasm for Buddhism, as well as its limits. After Ven. Seelakkhandha offered to send Carus some relics of the Buddha, Carus communicated his ambivalence toward the Buddhist practice of venerating the Buddha's material remains. He notes in his letter that he would welcome a relic because it "would show me the reverence in which the

Ceylonese hold their master and his saints” but asks that the monk provide specific information about the relic, including where it was discovered; he also promises to provide a more detailed statement of his views on relic veneration. He writes again the next day with a lengthy clarification of his position, expressing his concern that the gift will deprive Ven. Seelakkhanda of a treasured devotional object for the sake of one who would “value these relics for historical reasons only.” He continues:

According to my conception of Buddhism the most sacred relics we have of the Buddha and his saints are the words which they left,—the sūtras and all those ideas which we verify in our own experience as valuable truths. Words, thoughts, and ideas are not material things, they are ideal possessions, they are spiritual. It is true that they are transferred by material means in books and MSS. and by the vibrations of sounds, but it is not the book or the MS. or the sound waves that are sacred, but the ideas which are conveyed by them. Thus, all the treasures which I regard as holy are of a spiritual kind, and not of a material kind. The worship of relics, be they bones, hair, teeth, or any other material of the body of a saint, is a mistake. They do not possess any other value than the remains of ordinary mortals. The soul of Buddha is not in his bones, but in his words, and I regard relic-worship as an incomplete stage of religious worship in which devotees have not as yet attained to full [sic] philosophical clearness. Now certainly it is of interest to me to have evidences of the religious zeal of Buddhists. The keeping of sacred relics is a *symptom of their devotion*, but that is all I see in the use of relics.¹⁹

Ven. Seelakkhandha remained undeterred; he sent not only relics but also a detailed response to Carus’ views on relic veneration. Carus published a revised version of that response in *The Open Court* under the title, “A Buddhist Priest’s View of Relics.” In this article, Ven. Seelakkhandha provides an overview of Sri Lankan Buddhist views of relic veneration. Regarding the relic that he sent to Carus, he writes:

The relic I am sending you is one thus obtained from the ruins of a Dageba at A[nuradha]pura and has been kept with me with great veneration,—offering flowers, incense, etc., morn and eve. I believe this to be a genuine relic of the Buddha. We reverence Buddha’s relics as a mark of gratitude to Him who showed us the way to salvation and as a token of remembrance of the many personal virtues (bhagavat, arhat samyak-sambuddha) which His life illustrated; and those of His disciples (i.e., Rahats) for similar reasons, and also to keep us reminded of their noble exemplary lives as results of Lord Buddha’s invaluable doctrine.²⁰

This exchange effectively illustrates the complex intercultural negotiation of authority and meaning that characterized the attempts of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European and American scholars to understand and represent Buddhism. Western scholars depended heavily on the assistance of Buddhist monks to gain access to Buddhist texts and to master the languages in which they were written. At the same time, these scholars worked within a cultural milieu imbued with a profound confidence in the power of reason and scientific inquiry to uncover the truth, a milieu deeply shaped by the history of the conflict between religion and reason, and they saw themselves as heirs to a tradition of critical inquiry that put them in a privileged position to uncover the Buddha's original teachings on the basis of philological and historical analysis. Moreover, the picture of early Buddhism that was emerging from their studies of Buddhist scriptures seemed to reveal a philosophical orientation and a mode of emotionally detached analysis that resonated sympathetically with the moral and intellectual discipline of Western academic culture. Buddhist relic veneration therefore elicited a kind of cognitive dissonance. The role of relics in fostering an emotional attachment to the person of the Buddha and the ritualism to which they gave rise, to say nothing of the miraculous powers attributed to them, seemed out of character with what these scholars regarded as the most profound and admirable ideals of the Buddha's original teaching. Such practices could easily be regarded as, in Rhys Davids' case, evidence of the historical corruption of the tradition under the influence of popular weakness and prejudice, or as, in the case of Paul Carus, examples of "an incomplete stage of religious worship." In other words, they were superstitious. They were judged inauthentic, either on the grounds that they were not part of the Buddha's original teaching or because they appeared incompatible with the norms of an evolving science of religion.

In effect, both Rhys Davids and Carus sought to explain relic veneration away rather than elucidate its role in the history of Buddhism and in the Buddhist communities of their day. This perceived incompatibility between the reconstructed origins of the Buddhist tradition and ritualized devotion to the Buddha's bodily remains has defined, until the last fifteen years or so, the basic discourse within which relic veneration has been interpreted and has, in many cases, led scholars to simply ignore the practice altogether in their accounts of Buddhism. At the same time, it must be noted that there is some evidence of ambivalence toward relic veneration within early Buddhist tradition itself. In the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, a locus classicus for discussions of Buddhist relic veneration, one finds pas-

sages nestled together that seem to provide contradictory perspectives on the value of relic veneration and who should engage in it.

Consider, for example, the scene in which the Buddha has just settled himself between the twin sāla trees at Kusinārā where he will attain his ultimate passing away from the cycle of rebirth. The sāla trees are in blossom out of season, showering down sāla flowers upon the Buddha, along with mandāra blossoms, sandalwood powder and heavenly music. The text describes these as a form of offering (*tathāgatassa pūjāya*). In response the Buddha informs Ānanda that these sorts of offerings fall short of the highest form of honor and veneration, defined as “the monk or nun or male or female lay-disciple who lives following the Dhamma in its fullness, following the proper way of life, walking according to the Dhamma.”²¹

The commentary elucidates this statement with a quotation from the Buddha, who says that he did not make the resolution to become a Buddha at the feet of Dipaṅkara Buddha for the sake of garlands, scents, music, and song. The commentary observes that if the Buddha had not objected to this sort of offering, characterized as “worship with material things” (*āmisa-pūjā*), his followers would not have perfected moral virtue, concentration and insight, but instead would have occupied themselves with worshipping. It notes that not even a thousand monasteries equal to the Mahāvihāra, nor a thousand *cetiya*s equal to the Mahācetiya,²² would be adequate support for the well-being of the *sāsana* (Buddhist teachings and institutions). It thus concludes: “Now right practice is proper worship for the Tathāgata, and surely it is laid down by him and is able to support the *sāsana*.”²³

A little later in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, we find a discussion of what should be done with the Buddha’s body after he has passed away, and the Buddha states explicitly that his remains should be cremated in a manner befitting a great universal monarch (*cakkavattin*). This includes elaborate rites for preparing the body, cremation, and the erection of relic monuments (*thūpas*) in public places to enshrine the remaining relics. He concludes: “Those who there offer a garland, or scent, or paint, or make a salutation, or feel serene joy in their heart, that will be to their benefit and well-being for a long time.”²⁴ Yet even as this passage seems to recommend the value of relic veneration, it appears to enforce a clear separation between the roles of sangha members and the laity in funeral preparations. For the Buddha also addresses the following words to his faithful attendant Ānanda: “Do not trouble yourselves, Ānanda, with *sarīra-pūjā* of the Tathāgata; rouse yourselves, Ānanda, strive for the highest goal, attend to the highest goal, live heedful, zealous, resolute on the highest goal. There

are wise nobles, wise brahmins and wise householders who are devoted to the Tathāgata; they will perform *sarīra-pūjā* of the Tathāgata.”²⁵

This passage has typically been interpreted as evidence that members of the earliest Theravada sangha were initially prohibited from participating in relic veneration. The evidence for this is in part negative: the Theravada Vinaya (monastic code), in contrast to the Vinayas of some other Buddhist fraternities, says nothing about relic veneration.²⁶ The problem, again, is the presence of contradictory evidence, for the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* also provides a detailed account of the role of the great elder Mahākassapa in the cremation ceremony. When the Mallas attempt to light the funeral pyre, they are obstructed by the *devas* in attendance until Mahākassapa and his entourage of five hundred monks arrive on the scene. Mahākassapa venerates the Buddha’s body by placing his head on the Buddha’s feet, which, according to the commentary, miraculously emerge from their coverings. The funeral pyre then spontaneously ignites. Apparently, in this instance, Mahākassapa’s devotion to the Buddha’s body is deemed appropriate, even though he is both a monk and an *arahant*.²⁷

Once again, the text seems to juxtapose contradictory perspectives on the appropriateness of relic veneration for members of the sangha. Taken together, these passages can be read as evidence that authoritative Theravada tradition both affirmed the value of relic veneration and at the same time cautioned that it should not be the primary preoccupation of members of the sangha. This is hardly a rejection of the practice altogether, however, and the hypothesis that members of the sangha were prohibited from participating in relic veneration goes well beyond the evidence. In some respects, we can see a parallel between the theory that sangha members were explicitly prohibited from participation in the relic cult and the widely accepted hypothesis that there was for centuries a prohibition against representing the body of the Buddha in paintings and images, what is generally called the “aniconic” period in early Buddhism. Here again part of the evidence is negative: no images survive from the first several centuries of the Buddhist movement. This, coupled with early representations that depict the Buddha’s physical presence through symbols such as a royal umbrella or his throne of enlightenment, led to the widely accepted assertion that early Buddhists were prohibited from representing his bodily form out of respect for his nirvanic status. As with the dubious assertion that early Buddhist monks and nuns were initially prohibited from participating in relic veneration, however, the theory of an aniconic period is driven more by presumed doctrinal ideals than by compelling material evidence.²⁸ Indeed, when the centrality of the practice of relic veneration

during this period is taken into account, the existence of a prohibition against representing his physical body seems even less likely.

The reexamination of both the role of relic veneration and of the so-called aniconic period in early Buddhism can be seen as aspects of a wider reorientation taking place in Buddhist studies, a reorientation that is reshaping the study of religion more generally. As the art historian David Morgan has noted, scholars of religion are increasingly turning their attention to “visual culture.”²⁹ This interest in the visual diverges from the long-standing attention devoted to art and architecture by earlier generations of scholars in that it attempts to integrate material objects more fully into their social and cultural contexts at the local level. This integrative approach includes increased attention to how these objects and their attendant rituals orchestrate cognitive and affective dimensions of experience and to their role in articulating a wide range of power relationships, including social class, gender, and dynamics of colonial interaction. Consider, for example, how different a Buddhist reliquary appears when viewed in a museum display case and when seen upon the head of a lay donor carrying it in an enshrinement procession to the empty relic chamber of a new *stupa* where it will soon be permanently enclosed (see figure 1.1). In contrast to approaches that have highlighted the particular features of isolated artifacts in relation to idealized aesthetic norms or as examples of historically and culturally delimited styles, the study of visual culture helps to illuminate the role that particular objects play in shaping the dynamics of local power relations. Such an approach turns our attention to the fact that both the display case and the *stupa* take their respective places within and through a set of ritualized cultural practices. Each culturally privileged location lends itself, as well, to distinctive forms of knowledge and meaning.

What might be called the “rematerializing” of religion through increased attention to the bodies of religious practitioners and their ritualized interactions with material objects has taken place alongside a movement of theoretical deconstruction that has rendered increasingly suspect the categories of “religion” and the “religions.” If the discipline of religious studies could once be seen as clearly defined by the privileging of a unique experience (e.g., the “numinous”) or a distinctive interpretive category (e.g., the “sacred”), this is no longer the case, and there is considerable disagreement within the field about what, if anything, sets scholars of religion apart from those who study religion from within the disciplines of history, sociology, or anthropology. In addition, the “religions” (e.g., Buddhism, Islam, Christianity), once commonly defined by abstract belief



FIGURE 1.1. A relic enshrinement procession for a new relic monument (*dāgaba* in Sinhala) in southern Sri Lanka, 1985. At the head of the procession on the right is an elder monk, and on the left, a young layman standing in for his father, a wealthy contributor who was physically unable to participate in the procession. Out of respect the young man holds the reliquary on the top of his head, the symbolically highest and purest part of the body. Both the monastic and lay communities are represented here; the former group typically acquires the relics for enshrinement, while the latter group is responsible for construction of the relic monument. *Photograph by Kevin Trainor*

systems derived from canonical scriptures, are now increasingly fragmented along the fault lines of regional and local cultures.

Relic veneration as a focus of study provides an advantageous position from which to view the shifting boundaries of the discipline of Buddhist studies. On the one hand, it lends itself to broad comparative analyses, since many religious traditions include some variation on the practice of venerating the bodily remains of the “special dead.”³⁰ On the other hand, attention to specific relics, that is, the actual objects that are the focus of veneration, invites careful attention to local histories and to the interplay of social and cultural forces within a relatively circumscribed field.

For example, Buddhist relic veneration can be investigated as a distinctive form within a broader set of religious practices organized around the material remains (corporeal relics) and material representations (images) of authoritative religious figures. Following this line of inquiry, one could, for example, compare Buddhist and Christian relic practices with an eye toward illuminating important differences between the two traditions (an approach developed by John Strong in this volume). Or one could examine the category of “relic” itself as a means of highlighting cultural differences between Euro-American scholars and the Asian traditions that they study (see the chapter by Robert Sharf).

One can also frame a comparative analysis in a manner that highlights points of similarity between different traditions. For example, it is precisely the materiality of relics that makes them such useful and effective signifiers of authoritative presence, for both practitioners and scholars. As material objects they lend themselves to particular strategies of consolidation, dissemination, and controlled access and thus have frequently been employed by ruling elites, both lay and monastic, to further their respective interests (see figure 1.1). At the same time, relics and the structures that enshrine them provide the archeologist and historian with empirical data, and scholars are increasingly following the “relic trail” in their attempts to chart the ebb and flow of power relations in Buddhist societies (see the chapters by David Germano and Bernard Faure in this volume). Relics have also served to articulate a distinctive Buddhist geography punctuated with cultic centers and tied together by pilgrimage routes and have played a key role in the spread of Buddhism throughout Asia (see Donald Swearer’s chapter) and, more recently, into Europe and North America.

If relics have furthered the construction of a meaningful and coherent Buddhist landscape, they have also defined particular kinds of relationships to the past and future. It was a common trope of nineteenth-century

scholarship on “the East” to contrast the “Western” sense of history with its absence in South Asia. It is interesting to note how Buddhist relic traditions relate to this discourse of historical consciousness. There are, for example, aspects of Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition that suggest a preference for the repetition of timeless patterns in the biographies of various Buddhas and the histories of their relics. Even the Theravada tradition, so often contrasted with the Mahayana because of its attachment to the historical Buddha Gotama, identifies him as only the most recent in a long line of previous Buddhas and highlights the common features in the lives of all Buddhas, past and future. Likewise, the *Great Chronicle* of Sri Lanka (the *Mahāvamsa*) records that Gotama’s relics were enshrined at precisely the location where the relics of three previous Buddhas were preserved.³¹ In contrast to these ways in which relics appear to emphasize repetition of static patterns, Buddha relics have also served as signifiers of the transient and corruptible nature of the bodies of individual Buddhas whose corporeal remains arise and disappear. In Theravada tradition, the disappearance of a particular Buddha’s relics, along with the memory of his teachings, provides the necessary conditions for the arising of the next Buddha. In the case of Gotama, it has become an accepted tradition that his teachings and relics will last five thousand years after his final passing away. At the end of this period, his relics are expected to depart from their places of enshrinement throughout the world and congregate at Bodhgaya, the place of his enlightenment. There the relics will assemble in the shape of Gotama’s body, rise up in the air, and spontaneously combust, disappearing once and for all from the samsaric realm. Even if this event is itself a particular instance of a broader pattern of how Buddhas arise and disintegrate, the material remains themselves are unique and perishable (see figure 1.2). And, until their climactic reassembly and disappearance, they are tangible points of connection to the person of Gotama Buddha.

As such, these relics are regarded as effectively equivalent to the living presence of the Buddha for the purposes of devotion and gaining merit. As Jacob Kinnard observes in his chapter, relics enable a particular kind of relationship to the past teacher. Their tangible presence in cultic sites, sites which are themselves part of a broad cultural network of political and economic forces, brings the present-day Buddhist devotee into the past time of the Buddha. It is precisely through these “memory-sites”³² that Buddhists are reminded of what the Buddha did for them and are able to express through their ritual performances an appropriate sense of their dependence upon and gratitude toward him. These acts, in turn, are understood to create a future set of possibilities. The meritorious deeds (karma)

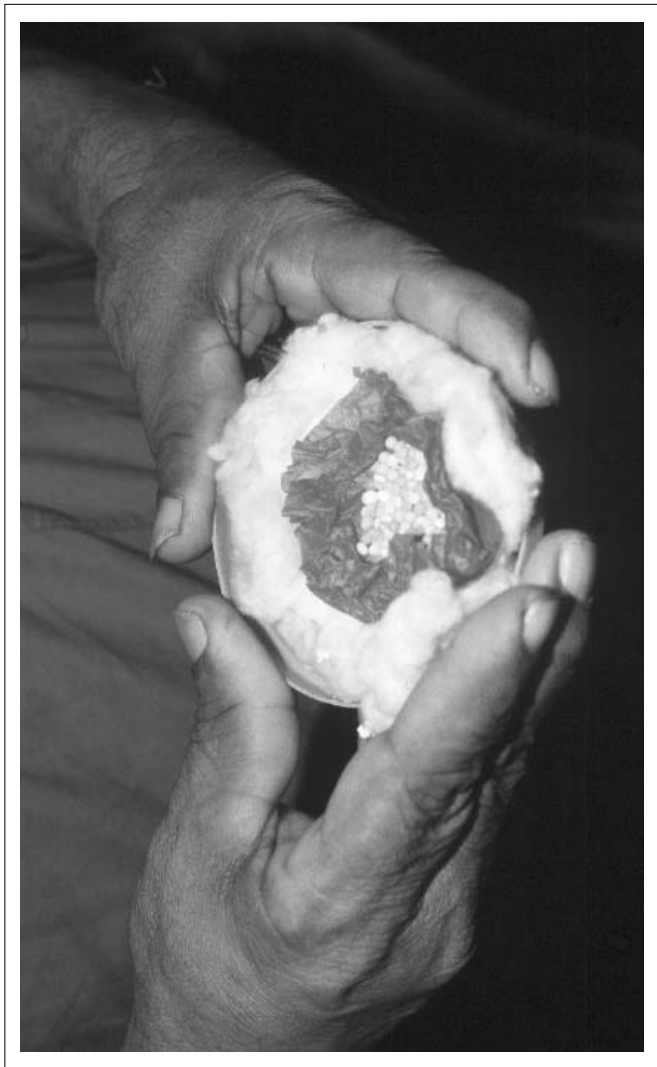


FIGURE 1.2. A collection of bodily relics “of the Buddha and the saints,” that is, arahants, prior to their enshrinement in a new relic monument in southern Sri Lanka in 1985. The chief monk informed me that these were donated by other monks when they learned that his monastery was constructing a new relic monument. According to one Theravada tradition, five thousand years after Gotama Buddha’s final passing away, all the Buddha’s bodily relics will travel from the places where they have been enshrined and reassemble in the form of his body before bursting into flame and disappearing forever. *Photograph by Kevin Trainor*

and their accompanying moods and motivations are expected to shape the devotee's future in such a way that he or she in a future rebirth will encounter the living presence of the next Buddha. These relic enshrinements are, in addition, memory-sites of a different sort for archeologists and historians who make use of them as evidence for reconstructing the history of Buddhism.

Many of the issues related to relic veneration that are highlighted in this volume are also relevant to sculptures and paintings of the Buddha. Jacob Kinnard's essay, in particular, examines the relationship between physical objects connected with the bodies of Buddhas (body parts and things with which they came into physical contact) and physical representations of Buddhas. There are clearly a number of salient differences between these two basic ways of representing Buddhas. For example, relics are typically hidden away in relic monuments or reliquaries and images are usually open to view. Moreover, the means through which relics and images are produced and gain authority are quite different. It is the physical continuity of a bodily relic or relic of use with the body of a Buddha that defines its venerability. While in practice bodily relics might seem to proliferate almost without limit, they are in principle numerically finite and thus subject to a kind of inherent material scarcity. Images are subject to no such material constraints; they can be manufactured endlessly as long as they bear the appropriate iconographical features, and consequently they lend themselves to different strategies of production and control. And, as Robert Sharf notes in his chapter, relics and images have quite different aesthetic qualities.

Despite these important differences, however, relics and images share a number of striking similarities. First of all, both relics and images are among the primary material means through which Buddhas continue to be "embodied" after their passing away, and thus they fit our general theme of "embodying the Dharma." This fact is reflected in the classic Theravada taxonomy of venerable "memorials" (*cetiya*s in Pāli, *caitya*s in Sanskrit), which differentiates three distinct categories: those containing bodily relics, those defined by relics of use, and those that are "commemorative" (a category identified with images); this classification first appears in the fifth-century CE Pāli commentaries.³³ Second, some images contain bodily relics and could thus be classified under more than one category of material mediation. Even when images do not actually incorporate bodily relics, they are commonly located within temple complexes alongside relic monuments, and both are typically the focus of devotional rituals. In this respect, images, like bodily relics and relics of

use, lend themselves to defining particular spaces that are associated with the presence of Buddhas, spaces that evoke and orchestrate devotional attitudes and behaviors. The study of images alongside relics thus highlights some of the distinctive ways in which both Buddhist studies and the study of religion are increasingly shaped by efforts to rematerialize their subject matter through a focus on embodiment.

It was in response to some of these interpretive shifts within the disciplines of religion and Buddhist studies that David Germano and I organized a multiyear seminar on Buddhist relic veneration under the auspices of the American Academy of Religion. The seminar met four successive years during annual AAR conferences beginning in 1994, with fifteen scholars contributing papers. The present volume is comprised of seven of those essays in revised form. This volume is, to date, the only extended analysis of Buddhist relic veneration bringing together contributions from scholars exploring a broad diversity of Buddhist cultural traditions, including India (Kinnard), Thailand (Swearer), Tibet (Germano), Japan (Faure), as well as essays framed primarily in comparative and theoretical terms (this introduction, Sharf, Strong). The chapters in this text also span a wide range of historical periods and reflect a variety of theoretical approaches. While there are many ways these pieces could be thematized and compared, for instance, on the basis of regional focus, sectarian affiliation, or historical period, I will discuss them under the following rubrics: taxonomies, royal appropriations, performative presences, textualizations, and comparisons.

TAXONOMIES

The central concern of David Germano's chapter, "Living Relics of the Buddha(s) in Tibet," is the classification of material objects and their relationship to fundamental Buddhist doctrines on the intrinsic Buddha-nature of all beings in the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Toward this end, Germano examines texts from the eleventh-century Seminal Heart (*snying thig*) tantric literature, as well as the writings of Longchenpa (*kLong chen pa*), who systematized the tradition in the fourteenth century. Germano identifies a general heightening of what he terms "funerary Buddhism" as one moves from the early Great Perfection literature, where funerary practices are "aestheticized" by rendering them less corporeal, into later strata of the textual tradition where one finds elaborate correlations between meditational attainments and a wide range of embodied physical signs and corporeal remains.

These manifestations are ultimately grounded in Seminal Heart teachings about the presence of the Buddha-nature in all things. Germano details how this Buddha-nature manifests itself within the consciousness of religious adepts and imprints itself on their bodies, giving rise after their deaths to small spheres that continue to multiply. These bodily signs are not merely the continuing presence of departed saints; they are, as well, manifestations of the ongoing process of religious realization within the bodies of those striving for enlightenment. Such ideas and practices should not be regarded as merely the remnants of an ancient textual tradition; Germano provides anecdotal evidence of their continued relevance to Tibetan practitioners today. His essay demonstrates the remarkable diversity and centrality of relics in Tibetan Buddhist tradition and the integration of relic practices with aspects of Buddhist tradition from which they have often been divorced by Western scholars, including abstract doctrinal reflection and meditation.

ROYAL APPROPRIATIONS

Bernard Faure's chapter, "Buddhist Relics and Japanese Regalia," examines the role that Buddhist relics played in struggles for political supremacy in Japan during the fourteenth century. Faure's chapter adopts a broad interpretive framework, exploring the multiple discourses that were centered on Buddhist relics and their attendant rituals in Japan. He traces, as well, the diverse forms in which relics were physically manifested, including wish-granting jewels, imperial regalia, and vital essence.

Faure also provides historical background on the Buddhist relic cult in China, noting the important role of supernaturals, especially *nāgas* (superhuman beings usually depicted as serpents in India and dragons in East Asia) and their subterranean kingdoms into which relics submerge themselves and later resurface. As the title of his piece suggests, one important dimension of a relic's potency is linked to its oscillation between invisibility and visibility, isolation and access. Faure also identifies a number of important dynamics in the Japanese appropriation and transformation of relics, including their association with fertility, rain making, and apotropaic powers that could be used to sap the potency of one's enemies. As he notes, relics in the Japanese context functioned as "floating signifiers" whose fluid yet potent associations could be used strategically for a diversity of political ends according to the changing circumstances in which Japanese rulers found themselves.

His analysis thus illuminates the need to carefully contextualize the significance and function of Buddhist relics in terms of local contestations of power and authority.

PERFORMATIVE PRESENCES

Jacob Kinnard's chapter, "The Field of the Buddha's Presence," contributes to an understanding of the notion of the Buddha's "presence" in images and relics by drawing out the cognitive, affective, and behavioral force that they exerted on Buddhists living in India during the period of Pāla rule (eighth through the eleventh centuries). Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's work, he maintains that our efforts to comprehend the presence of a Buddha image require us to reconstruct, as much as possible, the material circumstances and the implicit behavioral norms that shaped how Buddhists identified and interacted with that image. Thus the meaning of an image is not simply inherent in its aesthetic form, but instead emerges relationally as a given worshipper interacts with it in a ritualized setting.

Kinnard turns to a number of textual sources, starting with the Pāli canon, in order to reconstruct the "layered system" of inherited beliefs and practices that provided the context for recognizing and interacting with relics and images. These sources point to the religious significance of seeing the Buddha during his lifetime and highlight the importance of ritualized remembrance and visualization techniques. He suggests that Buddha images served not so much to make the Buddha present as to make the viewer past, that is, to project the viewer back into a time when the Buddha was alive and performing powerful deeds on behalf of those with whom he interacted. Noting that the field in which devotees interacted with Buddha images could embody contradictions and tensions, he demonstrates how an image such as the *Aṣṭamahāprātihārya*, depicting the eight great events in the life of the Buddha, could simultaneously serve as a memento by means of which a pilgrim called to mind a powerful religious journey, as a token venerated in lieu of such a journey, and as a physical embodiment of the Buddha's entire life and collection of teachings.

TEXTUALIZATIONS

Donald Swearer's chapter, "Signs of the Buddha in Northern Thai Chronicles," draws our attention to chronicle texts that have not received adequate scholarly attention in the West. Beginning with an overview of some of the types of historical sources produced in Thailand, Swearer turns his

attention to a particular northern Thai chronicle called “The Chronicle of the Water Basin,” which describes the Buddha’s travels through that region, emphasizing in particular a mountain north of Chiang Mai known today as Doi Chiang Dao, the “Mountain of the Abode of the Stars.” While the chronicle itself appears to bring together three distinct kinds of stories, all three share a common physical referent: the sacred mountain hallowed by the Buddha’s visit in the past, present repository of his material signs, and future site of the coming righteous world ruler.

The chronicle records that when the Buddha visited the mountain, his presence there gave rise to a broad range of material signs, including corporeal relics, a footprint, and various images (corresponding to the three basic categories of devotional memorials recognized in Theravada tradition). Most striking among the corporeal relics produced during his visit were relics comprised of substances ordinarily considered highly polluting. At one point the site where the Buddha urinated became “the Holy Footprint Bathroom Resting Place.” In another place, mucous dripping from the Buddha’s nose floated up into a nearby tree and the mucous-covered leaves were gathered as relics. While the character of the first relic is somewhat ambiguous, since it could be classed as either a corporeal relic or a relic of use, the second case suggests that even the Buddha’s nasal effluvia are worthy of veneration.

Swearer concludes his essay by distinguishing three distinctive levels on which this text constructs the Buddha and his material signs. The first of these he characterizes as magical or instrumentalist, the second as cosmological, and the third as ontological. On the first level direct contact with the Buddha during his lifetime or later through his material signs brings worldly blessings and increases one’s store of merit. On a second level the Buddha’s presence organizes a cosmic order centered on the sacred mountain. On a third level the material signs of the Buddha transcend the limits of historical time and serve as the Buddha’s living presence. On this third level, Swearer notes, the Buddha is “read” from his material signs and emerges as a living reality.

COMPARISONS

John Strong’s chapter, “Buddhist Relics in Comparative Perspective: Beyond the Parallels,” examines Buddhist and Christian relic veneration, identifying a number of differences in how relics function in the two traditions. His analysis is organized around seven basic themes: approaching and touching; seeing and experiencing; dioramas and biography; rou-