the CAMBRIDGE ENCYCLOPEDIA of ANTHROPOLOGY

Buddhism

JOANNA COOK & HILDEGARD DIEMBERGER, *University College London & University of Cambridge*

Buddhism has existed for around two and half millennia, and is practiced by over 500 million people in the world today. The anthropology of Buddhism spans the breadth of the Buddhist world and provides rich ethnographic accounts of the religion as lived in diverse social contexts. Anthropological studies have evolved from early taxonomic work to the study of continuities and reinterpretations of socially embedded Buddhist traditions. Today, they encompass broad considerations of politics, economics, ethics, and belief. This entry considers the biography of the Buddha before examining the tenets, organisation, and spread of Buddhism. It then provides an overview of the development of the anthropology of Buddhism and key areas of focus, paying particular attention to processes of religious reform and reconstruction, political and economic relationships, and transformations in social and ethical life.

Introduction

Buddhism is commonly understood as the set of teachings and practices inspired by the South Asian spiritual master Gautama Siddhartha, who lived during the fifth century BCE. It aims at liberation from the suffering of worldly existence and the cycle of rebirth known as *Samsara*, and the attainment of *Nirvana*, a state of ultimate salvation, notably the release from greed (*raga*), aversion (*dvesha*), and ignorance (*moha*). Initiated as a universal and ethical religious path, Buddhism acquired significant popularity by proposing a middle way between extreme asceticism and the rigid household and social status-centred Hindu ritualism of the time. Considered to be one of the 'world religions', Buddhism has attracted a great deal of attention not only in the countries where it has been practised for centuries but also across the world, becoming a focus of investigation for many academic disciplines including social and cultural anthropology.

Defining Buddhism, however, has proved to be a challenge. Are diverse local instantiations of religious practice in geographically distant regions all part of a larger religion? Debates on this question highlight the tension between the multiplicity of Buddhist traditions and the belief that these embody a unique spiritual legacy that is recognisable across all geographical, temporal, and cultural boundaries. From one perspective, 'Buddhism' may be deconstructed to uncover a multitude of practices in diverse places at different times, revealing a variegated and historically complex phenomenon. From a different point of view, we might identify the continuous historical links that join different branches of Buddhism around the world, pointing to the traits that are shared by those who self-identify as Buddhist (see, for example, Bechert, Lamotte & Gombrich 1984).

 ISSN 2398-516X

The following sections will provide a brief overview of the biography of the Buddha and his connection to sacred relics and places, the tenets of Buddhism, Buddhist social organisation, the spread of Buddhism, and definitions of Buddhism as a 'world religion'. It then turns to the anthropology of Buddhism.

In some senses, anthropological studies of Buddhism answered the questions of earlier orientalist scholarship, or at least put them to bed. Much early scholarship had portrayed Buddhism as a timeless, textual, rational, ascetic, non-violent, and apolitical religion. In contrast, anthropologists and Buddhist scholars show that Buddhism is better understood as lived and embedded in social practices. They tend to highlight both the continuities and constant reinterpretations of Buddhism as a set of socially located traditions. Early anthropological studies were concerned with understanding Buddhism through taxonomic frameworks. Stanley Tambiah (1970), for example, identified three principal focuses of Thai Buddhism, namely merit-making (kammatic Buddhism), rituals of protection (apotropaic Buddhism) and practices of mental purification (nibbanic Buddhism). Geoffrey Samuel (1983) distinguished 'clerical' and 'shamanic' orientations in Tibetan Buddhism, reflecting debates about the nature of Buddhism occurring in the Buddhist world. Subsequent work has provided us with rich ethnographic accounts. Some of these show how Buddhism changes over time, by studying reformist Buddhist movements, processes of religious reconstruction, the globalisation of Buddhist lineages, or the deeply political nature of Buddhist history and practice. Others investigate how Buddhist thought is lived concretely, investigating the relationship between Buddhism and violence, the relationship between the living and the dead, practices of magical power and protection, and the value of wealth creation in religious communities. Recent work has explored lay religious practice as well as the lives of monastic communities, Buddhist gender relations and environmentalism, meditation and self-cultivation, as well as the development of scientific and therapeutic framings of Buddhist practices.

In search of Buddha's life

The biographies of the Buddha were only written down approximately four centuries after his passing. According to these narratives, the Buddha was born as Gautama Siddharta in the fifth to fourth century BCE in Lumbini, in what is now Nepal, close to the northern Indian border. His father was a local ruler who tried to protect him from everyday reality. However, Gautama experienced dissatisfaction with the suffering of human existence following an encounter with an old, an ill, and a dead human being. He left his royal life, abandoning his wife and child, to devote himself to the pursuit of spiritual liberation. After trying different routes, he achieved enlightenment and liberation from suffering in Bodhgaya (in what is now the state of Bihar in India). He gave his first sermon in the Deer Park in Sarnath, near Banaras, in which he preached the basic tenets of Buddhism known as the Four Noble Truths (see below). He subsequently assembled around him a large number of disciples. In Rajagrha (modern Rajgir), with the support of a local ruler, he is said to have gathered together this congregation of disciples in a more formal way, establishing

 ISSN 2398-516X

what is considered to have been the first monastic institution. He eventually died, literally 'passed into Nirvana', in Kusinagar, in what is now the state of Uttar Pradesh in India, at the age of eighty-four, leaving behind his bodily relics and his teachings, which became objects of worship for later generations.

The narrative of Buddha's life eventually became a 'paradigm' (Tambiah 1984) that inspired both the actual deeds and the biographical narratives of subsequent Buddhist masters across the Buddhist world. Biographical writing was and continues to be very important in many Buddhist traditions (see e.g. Gyatso 1998). Biographical narratives are also closely connected to relics and sacred places that have continued to be central to Buddhist devotion up to the present day. The Buddha's relics were divided into eight upon his death and were later widely distributed by the Indian Emperor Asoka. Pilgrimage to pay respect to these relics became the focus of Buddhist religious practices in a multitude of sites across Asia (Strong 2004). The recently much-expanded Famen temple in China, for example, houses the finger bone of the Buddha, while the Fo Guang Shan Memorial Center in Taiwan houses his tooth. The key sites of Buddha's life in India, abandoned after having been important pilgrimage destinations for many centuries, were rediscovered, and archaeologically investigated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see e.g. Allen 2003 for an overview). The pilgrimage site of Lumbini, the Deer Park in Sarnath, and the re-established cosmopolitan university of Nalanda in the vicinity of the ancient city of Rajagrha, for example, have increasingly become the focus of globalised Buddhist communities and sites of intense international pilgrimage in recent years (see Cook 2018). The Mahabodhi Temple Complex in Bodh Gaya received UNESCO World Heritage status in 2002 and now attracts hundreds of thousands of Buddhist pilgrims each year (Geary 2017).

The Three Jewels of Buddhism

Despite the diversity of Buddhist teachings and practices around the world, some Buddhist concepts are seen as foundational and can be recognised across all traditions. The Buddha, the Dharma (i.e. his teaching), and the Sangha (i.e. the monastic community) are known as the 'Three Jewels of Buddhism' (*triratna*) in which every Buddhist takes refuge not only when first entering the Buddhist Path towards Enlightenment but also at the beginning of Buddhist rituals. The Four Noble Truths, the core of Buddha's First Sermon in the Deer Park in Sarnath, are also pivotal to any Buddhist tradition: first, life is suffering; second, suffering is rooted in attachment and craving (*trsna*); third, by uprooting this attachment in all its forms, liberation from suffering can be achieved; fourth, liberation can be obtained in practice by following an eightfold path involving right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. In Buddhist salvation teaching (soteriology), all phenomena are marked by three characteristics: suffering (mentioned above), the fact that there is no 'self', and the impermanence and imperfection of all things. In spite of these teachings, people become attached to impermanent things, ignoring the truth that everything is conditioned and subject to change,

 ISSN 2398-516X

and as such suffering is perpetuated. Underpinning all this is the idea that all sentient beings are caught up in a cycle of rebirth (Samsara) maintained by their deeds (karma) until they obtain liberation from Samsara and achieve Nirvana – a concept that indicates both 'emptiness' and 'liberation', exceeds human grasp, and has been the focus of intense doctrinal debates. Through the cultivation of morality, meditation, and wisdom, Buddhists seek to gain experiential insight into the three characteristics of all phenomena, which ultimately leads to the cessation of rebirth and freedom from the cycle of conditioned existence. Debates about the nature of Samsara and Nirvana, the self and the world, the interconnectedness of all phenomena, attachment, the temporality and the scope of liberation, ways of knowing, emptiness, and other soteriological and epistemological issues have marked Buddhist traditions throughout their history.[1]

Social organisation

In Buddhist teaching, all beings may attain enlightenment, but the ability to do so will be informed by current incarnation, commitment to liberation, and past karma. This is most clearly highlighted in the common distinction between those who have given priority to their spiritual goal (monastics and, in a different way, ascetics) and those who are constrained by their worldly commitments (the laity). For this reason, Buddhist teaching informs both renunciate forms of religion, practised by adepts devoted to complete liberation from worldly concerns, and lay forms of religion appealing to a wide range of people steeped in their worldly existence and participating through patronage and devotional practices to Buddhist spiritual endeavours. Through the accumulation of good actions, both groups improve their reincarnation prospects and those of the people with whom they are or were connected. In the early days of Buddhism, merchants were particularly attracted by a vision that, in contrast to pre-existing religious beliefs and practices, offered a more flexible and merit-oriented approach to spirituality and to all the ritual needs of human life. Buddhism's universal message had the potential to transcend transmitted and engrained social distinctions. This made it particularly attractive to people who were entrepreneurial and benefitted materially and spiritually from patronage practices (despite the apparent contradictions related to the recommended disengagement from worldly matters). In fact, historians of Buddhism generally link the emergence of Buddhism and other salvific religions addressing liberation from human suffering during the same period to the rise of urban centres and trade networks (Bailey & Mabbett 2003). These provided both the range of human experiences and the material support that enabled the monastic community to thrive (see Schopen 2004). Promoting virtuous behaviour and the acceptance of spiritual hierarchy, Buddhism was also embraced by a wide range of rulers who used it as a moral framework, the foundation for legal systems, and as a tool of governance. The figure of the Buddhist ruler as *Dharmaraja* (Dharma king) and *Cakravartin* (Ruler of the World) and the tension between renunciation and worldly power inspired works such as Tambiah's *World conqueror and world renouncer* (1976), which explored the relationship between Buddhism and polity in Thailand, arguing that they were and still are profoundly

 ISSN 2398-516X

interconnected. The tension between renunciation and worldly life also attracted later anthropologists and historians in different historic and ethnographic settings (see, for example, Ruegg 1995 on India and Tibet).

The spread of Buddhism

Since the time of the Buddha, and the early Buddhist masters that followed him, contrasting views have shaped the way in which Buddhist traditions developed in different places. Buddhists have positioned themselves in relation to each other and negotiated their relationship to pre-existing religious practices and beliefs. Whilst diverse Buddhist traditions developed in very different contexts with distinctive features and modes of transmission, the feeling that Buddha's message could travel across boundaries and be recognised by human beings of all sorts is certainly very ancient and perceived as being intrinsic to Buddhism by adherents in geographically distant places. Most strikingly, traveling texts and relics as well as pilgrimage routes to Buddhist sites have been central to a web of relations that developed across Asia. Sites of pilgrimage and meditation were nodes within networks that brought together a wide range of people speaking a kaleidoscope of languages, reflected in a rich and multifarious textual production. It is not surprising, therefore, that over the centuries translators and translations played an extremely important role in the way Buddhist traditions evolved, diversified, and were sometimes contested. At the same time, Buddhism had a huge impact on book production and communication technologies, and it is in the Buddhist context of Tang China that printing was first discovered at the turn of the eighth century (Barrett 2008). Translations, editions, and publications of Buddhist texts were (and still are) recognised as some of the greatest deeds enabled by the patronage of devout followers from all walks of life (Diemberger 2014; Diemberger, Ehrhard & Kornicki 2016). Buddhist attitudes also informed the way in which digital technologies were enthusiastically adopted by a wide range of communities (Diemberger & Hugh-Jones 2014). Especially in places where Buddhist scriptures suffered periods of suppression and destruction, the retrieval of surviving manuscripts and prints triggered the mobilisation of communities in this endeavour. As they embraced new tools and skills that facilitated textual reproduction and distribution, people combined the morality and rituality associated with books with the new mediums.

Early 'international' scholarship

The English term 'Buddhism' (developed in parallel to the French *Bouddhisme* and the German *Buddhismus*) emerged as a unifying abstraction relatively recently – in contrast to a range of vernacular terms such as the Sanskrit *dharma,* the Pali *dhamma,* and the Tibetan *chos,* which indicate 'the law/doctrine' (see also Lopez 1998). The term 'Buddhism' only became fashionable in the nineteenth century (initially in the context of the Royal Asiatic Society and other learned and spiritual associations) and describes, broadly speaking, a body of scriptures, religious practices, and communities of adepts that were originally inspired by the teaching of Gautama Siddhartha. The formulation of this term reflected the

 ISSN 2398-516X

growing fascination of colonial civil servants, explorers, and scholars with this ancient religion. This interest led archaeologists, art historians, philologists, and linguists to embark on a huge enterprise of rediscovering Buddhist civilization in India and its ramifications across Asia. In the late nineteenth century, Buddhism began to be identified and assembled as a 'world religion' by European philologists. Scholars identified various strands of religious practice in Central, South, South East, and East Asia as part of a religion that was comparable with the Abrahamic 'world religions' of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity (Masuzawa 2005), with each world religion categorised as a roughly comparable kind of social phenomenon that related to a corresponding 'civilisation' in a similar way. But Buddhism did not emerge solely as a result of philological pursuit. Reform movements of the time were central to an on-going process of 'intercultural mimesis' (Hallisey 2014: 94) in which international representations of Buddhism and modernist Buddhist movements echoed and informed each other (Masuzawa 2005: 308), reflecting parallel debates about moral propriety and religious validity. What these developments highlight is that non-Buddhist scholars and practising Buddhists shared a concern to delineate 'true' or 'pure' Buddhism, and that their very different agendas informed each other.

Until the 1960s, studies of Buddhism tended to focus on a distant past. Philologists, art historians, and archaeologists brought together fragments from a remote Buddhist era in the reconstruction of ancient Buddhist civilizations (see e.g. Frauwallner 2010 [1956]). Scholars sometimes saw contemporary Buddhist societies at best as a source of subsidiary information on what used to be, and at worst as corruptions of what Buddhism should be.[2] Languages of living Buddhist societies, such as Tibetan ones, were initially considered worthy of scholarly attention more because of the value of the Tibetan translations of Buddhist texts lost in their land of origin than for what they expressed in terms of Tibetan culture. Even when scholars started to look more carefully at living Buddhist societies and cultures, they combined dominant assumptions from their own culture with the Buddhist sense of authoritativeness of texts and tended to give priority to the written word handed down over generations. This is reflected, for example, in the emphasis given to textual research in international scholarship in Buddhist Studies. This approach often implied an idealised past set in contrast to a necessarily deficient present; erudite elites as a source of information were set in contrast to the wider seemingly ignorant population; wise elders were set in contrast to unknowing younger generations, etc. The understanding of Buddhism formed by European scholars and that of Buddhist scholastic elites coincided and combined in privileging a rationalistic approach that seemed to contrast sharply with local popular practices (a point that was critically discussed by Southwold [1983] in his study of Buddhism in a Sinhalese village).

Whilst international scholars of Buddhism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century had developed their interest in Buddhist civilisations against the background of competing colonial powers, after WWII the geopolitical stage transformed radically with the process of decolonisation and the emergence of new nation-states. Gradually, new voices and new approaches emerged. By the 1970s new, more globalised

scholarly networks became established, such as the International Association for Buddhist Studies and the International Association for Tibetan Studies, alongside earlier learned societies. Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* (1978), which argued for a critical engagement with implicit cultural biases and colonial legacies, promoted a profound rethinking of Oriental Studies over the following decades. At the same time, the diaspora that originated from the suppression of Buddhism in communist countries as well as the revival that followed the transformation or collapse of communist regimes in Asia brought to the fore a wide range of new materials and new perspectives as well as the voices of scholars coming from the relevant regions. The increasing international access to countries where Buddhism was practised (Thailand, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Japan, Korea), or had been practised in the recent past and was being revived after a period of suppression (Mongolia, China, Vietnam, Buryatia), offered new opportunities for investigation and engagement. Anthropologists (largely from 'Western' countries but joined by an increasing numbers of scholars from Asia) began to analyse transformations in Buddhism within and in response to a colonially-structured modernity through an explicit engagement with contemporary postcolonial modernities.

The anthropology of Buddhism: early approaches

The relationship between precept and practice was a central focus for early anthropologists, who identified significant differences between local practices and liberation from Samsara according to Buddha's teaching. In contrast to the Orientalist representation of Buddhism as rational, ascetic, renunciatory, and apolitical, anthropological studies revealed the complex ways in which Buddhism intersected with local political, economic, and social realities. Early anthropologists proposed idealised taxonomies to account for the diversity of practice that they witnessed. According to David Gellner (1990), early anthropological taxonomies fell into three broad camps: a 'modernist' approach in which true Buddhism is the 'normative' religion of elites, but most popular religion is informed by degraded elements of Buddhist teachings and practices (e.g. Terwiel 1975); an 'anthropological' approach that recognised elite and popular religion as being inseparable but distinct elements of a whole (Tambiah 1970; Spiro 1970), which, though apparently contradictory, must be understood in relation to each other; and a 'populist' approach that privileges the perspective of village Buddhism whilst being deeply critical of elite urbanite Buddhism and its claim to represent true Buddhism (Southwold 1983). Making sense of the diversity of practices and the seeming contradictions between them led anthropologists and scholars of Buddhism to variously interpret Buddhism as 'syncretistic', implying the amalgamation of different traditions (Terwiel 1975), as an accretive tradition that sits alongside other traditions (Gombrich 1971), as a total system containing different 'modes' of religion (Spiro 1982 [1970]), and as a holistic system that contained contrastive focuses (Tambiah 1970).

In the 1980s anthropologists, working in collaboration with scholars of other disciplines, began to argue that 'Buddhism' itself was not a stable category. Rich ethnographies, some of which came from areas that

 ISSN 2398-516X

had only recently become accessible to outsiders, highlighted the great variety of Buddhist experiences. Critical approaches to the study of Buddhism opened up new avenues for investigation and scholarly engagement. The focus of attention shifted towards understanding reform movements, the proliferation of hybrid practices, and processes of reconstruction after suppression by secularist regimes. For example, Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere's important work (1988) on Sri Lanka revealed how modernist and reformist forms of Buddhism emphasised subjective religious experience, formulated a new set of values for Sri Lanka's Sinhala bourgeoisie, and expressed an ethno-national political struggle in Buddhist terms. In this time, significant anthropological works examined the relationship between one of the two main branches of Buddhism, called Mahayana Buddhism, and shamanism (Mumford 1989; Samuel 1993; Ortner 1978). For example, Stan Royal Mumford (1989) drew on Mikhail Bakhtin to argue that Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions mutually shape one another without relying on any overarching single system. In the 1990s, ritual complexity in Mahayana contexts became the focus of sustained anthropological attention. For instance, David Gellner's (1992) ethnography of Newar Buddhism in Nepal examined the complexity of Newar ritual practice and Hindu-Buddhist relations, revealing the contested socio-religious hierarchies and identities of the Kathmandu Valley. This work shows how the Newar caste system has been shaped by Buddhist and Hindus religious hierarchies, and how this has created the grounds for negotiation and contestation.

Over time, an increasing number of anthropologists have engaged with Buddhist settings, bringing to bear wider epistemological and methodological debates within and across disciplinary boundaries. The focus of attention, often informed by wider cultural and geo-political processes, has produced a wide range of ethnographic engagements too diverse to cover in this entry, which will give just a few examples.

Religious change, contestation, and propagation

The debate about what counts as 'Buddhist' and how best to understand religious diversity has not just raged in international academia. Debates about the correct Buddhist path, for whom it is appropriate, and questions of authenticity and moral efficacy were pressing concerns for many Buddhists themselves. For example, since the 1990s Thailand has witnessed an efflorescence of competing forms of religiosity. Reformist Buddhists have argued that Buddhism and Buddhist practices are compatible with scientific empiricism and provide an alternative method for inquiring into and understanding the nature of suffering. During the same period, a proliferation of alternative practices has occurred, such as an unprecedented interest in protective tattoos and amulets, an increasing commitment to charismatic monks and merit-making activities, and an increase in popular spirit-medium cults informed by mass media and religious commodification (McDaniel 2011; Pattana 2005a; Tanabe 1991). Reformist Buddhists interpret such practices as 'non-Buddhist' while other Buddhists engage constructively with them as they multiply at an extraordinary rate.

Interactions across the Buddhist world and beyond have long been the focus of anthropological studies. In addition to significant work on Buddhist missionary and social welfare work in an era of globalisation (see Learman 2005; Queen and King 1996), anthropologists have charted the spread of globalised Buddhist movements and exchanges (see Chandler 2004). For example, Sarah Levine and David Gellner (2005) show that the recent introduction of Theravada Buddhism to Nepal has led to a revivalism that has invigorated Newar ethnic identity. These changes have influenced nationalist politics, expanded feminist Buddhist movements, and reformed lay expectations of religious organisation through an emphasis on the universal accessibility of teachings. International influence and globalisation are reflected in the worldwide spread of Tibetan Buddhism. They reveal how a particular Buddhist tradition adapts to new contexts. Thus Tibetan Buddhist practices and organisational structures are resignified in the diaspora (Lopes 2015), as seen, for example, in the Buddhist consecration of sacred sites in California.

Politics, violence, illness, and death

Tensions and paradoxes between the religious and the secular have attracted significant anthropological attention for some time (Bubandt & van Beek 2011). Anthropologists have examined the relationship between Buddhism and politics in countries in Asia (see Frydenlund 2016; Kawanami 2016) and the links between Buddhism, politics, nationalism, and the state (Frydenlund 2017; Madsen 2007; Raghavan 2016; Seneviratne 1999; Walton 2016).

Buddhists have revived their traditions after suppression in communist states and they have re-invented and re-purposed their ritual practices in new settings, often negotiating a difficult tension between secular state structures and religious authority. For example, historical political upheaval has led to significant connections between politics and religion for contemporary monks in Mongolia (Humphrey & Hürelbaatar 2013). In post-Maoist China, former communist comrades have taken up Buddhism (Fisher 2014), and monks in Southwest China negotiate transnational influences, the indifference of the state, and local revival efforts (Borchert 2017). In northeast Tibet, Geluk monastic revival and development are embedded in localised relationships, priorities, and values, beyond either resistance to or accommodation of state policies (Caple 2019). Jane Caple argues that relationships here are shaped in terms of virtue, rather than power and influence, revealing that people's actions are not fully explained by state pressure.

The link between Buddhism and politics has extended into an anthropological consideration of violence in Buddhist contexts. A conflict between the Buddhist norms of non-violence and Buddhist support for state violence, monastic involvement in civil violence and Buddhist intersectarian violence, reflect the complicated relationship between religious nationalism and violence in diverse Buddhist contexts (Jerryson & Juergensmeyer 2010). For example, Iselin Freydunlund (2017) shows that a 'positive Orientalist' stereotype of peaceful Buddhists is incorporated into militant nationalist movements in Sri Lanka (see also Tikhonov & Brekke 2013). More broadly, anthropologists have traced the links between Buddhism, politics,

and social movements. The cult of sacred mountains in Mongolia, for example, has been sponsored and reframed by the country's president to support a nationalist agenda, one that can be considered 'cosmopolitical' for the way that it engages non-human actors in the political arena (Sneath 2014: 458-72). Furthermore, sacred landscapes and the rituals associated with them have been instrumental in the development of various forms of 'green' Buddhism intersecting with modernist environmentalism (see, for example, Miller, Smyer Yu & van Veer 2014). The relationship between social issues and Buddhism also plays out with respect to intense air pollution in Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia. Here, Buddhist environmentalists engage critically with toxic air and its effects on all sentient beings, effectively incorporating concerns around air pollution into Mongolian religious and ritual life (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2019). Such works reveal how Buddhist ideas about purification, revitalisation, and enlightenment interact with pressing issues such as climate change, urban development, and nationalism.

Such ideas are linked to the theme of the impermanence of human life, which has been at the heart of Buddhism since its inception and significantly informs its healing practices and death rituals. In addition to engaging with a wide range of healing traditions across the Buddhist world (for example, the Tibetan *sowa rigpa*), attention has been given to the deployment of Buddhist concepts and re-purposing of rituals in light of new individual and public health challenges, as reflected in emerging scholarship in the COVID-19 pandemic (see Kuyakanon in press). Anthropological work has highlighted the particular focus on death, funerals, and the relationship between the living and the dead in Buddhist reflection and rituality. For example, highly complex funeral cultures in Southeast Asia and China mediate the relationship between the living and the dead, enabling ritual participants to cultivate religious merit and transforming the status of the dead (Ladwig & Williams 2012). Concerns with death are also reflected in public debates about the status and location of the dead in Japan, where new Buddhist funerary practices have developed in response to political and economic change (Rowe 2011). The politics of memory and representations of violence informed Thailand's pro-democracy movement in the 1990 and its aftermath, as reflected in Alan Klima's (2002) ethnography of funeral gambling and Buddhist meditation on death. Comparatively, the enduring relevance of a nineteenth-century monk and a ghost and the protective media associated with them in contemporary Thailand are described by Justin McDaniel (2011) as 'cultural repertoires', engagement with which supports Thai Buddhists as they navigate their lives.

Buddhist economics, monastic life, and gender

Anthropologists have analysed Buddhist historical and ethnographic materials through careful attention to economic practice. For example, they have shown that wearing protective amulets is intended to ensure educational success, protection from disease, and business prosperity. Many Buddhist practitioners in Japan engage with Buddhism in order to receive practical benefits, as highlighted by Ian Reader and George Tanabe's (1998) examination of the economic and commercial aspects of religious practice. In

Thailand, the Dhammakaya temple's wealth and fundraising practices sparked extensive debate about the nature of authentic Buddhism and religious authority (Scott 2009). Rachelle Scott situates these debates in the context of the re-evaluations of wealth, global capitalism, and Asian values spurred by the Asian economic crisis. She shows that merit-making and meditation have been coupled with personal and social prosperity. Buddhist values of gifting and charity are central to renumeration for religious services, creating links between economics, death, and ritual (Sihlé *et al.* 2015). Are Buddhist alms donations best understood as attempting to avoid the debts of reciprocity (Strenski 1983)? Or does alms-giving create relationships of positive reciprocity between the monastic community and laity (Carrithers 1984)? These longstanding anthropological debates take on new significance in contemporary contexts. For example, the Buddhist values of gifting and charity inform the donation of human tissue in Sri Lanka, which Bob Simpson (2004) analyses to critique Euro-American framings of bioethics.

Anthropologists have provided detailed accounts of monastic life and the relationship between monastics and laity. For example, religious authority and truth in Tibetan monasticism are informed by the relationship between diverse traditions and communities (Mills 2003), and life within Himalayan Buddhist nunneries is informed by gendered hierarchies and concerns over subsistence (Gutschow 2004; Grimshaw 1992). In different ways, Kim Gutschow and Anna Grimshaw reveal that gender and sexuality inform ritual and social power. Lay-monastic relations also have powerful affective dimensions, as seen in Jeffrey Samuels' (2010) rich ethnographic account of the constitutive role that emotions play in Sri Lankan social life and religious practice. Comparatively, contemporary debates about the role of temple Buddhism in Japanese society are informed by the ways in which Buddhism is approached by both laity and clerics and the economic realities that shape ritual practices, as explored by Stephen Covell (2005) in his study of the rhetoric of renunciation and the practices of clerical marriage and householding in contemporary Japanese Buddhism. Relationships between monastics and laity are also a central theme in anthropological research on gender. Anthropologists (along with historians and scholars of Buddhism) have devoted increasing attention to debates about gender and Buddhism, exploring the tension between a Buddhist 'soteriological inclusiveness' (Sponberg 1992), by which gender distinctions are inconsequential for enlightenment, and the apparent female exclusion and subordination that is often encountered in texts and living practices across Buddhist societies (Gyatso & Havnevik 2005; Soucy 2015). An increasing body of literature shows that women have engaged with Buddhist spiritual projects in a variety of ways (often misrecognised by historical sources), sometimes becoming spiritual masters in their own right, more often through patronage structures and merit-making activities. Through examinations of gendered sacred spaces (Makeley 1999: 343-66; Huber 1994: 350-71), the lives of female spiritual masters (Diemberger 2007; Seeger 2018) and the current Bhikkhuni/Bhikshuni debate (the bid to introduce full-ordination for women; Levine & Gellner 2005; Lekshe Tsomo 2008; Jampa Tsedroen 2008), anthropologists have shown that women participate in a wide range of Buddhist enterprises: not only the construction of temples and reproduction of scriptures projects, but also various forms of engaged Buddhism and charity work.

 ISSN 2398-516X

Transforming spiritual technologies

Anthropologists have mapped an increasing lay interest in morally transformative technologies, such as dharma study, ascetic discipline, and pilgrimage. Of these, lay meditation may be the greatest single change to have occurred in Theravada Buddhism since the Second World War (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988: 237). Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, an unprecedented lay meditation movement grew rapidly in Theravada Buddhist countries. Whereas previously, very few monastics practiced meditation and it was considered to be an inappropriate practice for laity, reformist meditation monks propagated *vipassana* meditation to monastics and laity alike. Early anthropological work in Thailand showed that meditation was promoted as a 'rational' and 'authentic' practice, informed by ideas about scientific rationality and personal responsibility (Van Esterik 1977). More recently, Joanna Cook's (2010) ethnography of a meditation monastery in Thailand reveals that meditation impacts community organisation, social relationships, and gender hierarchy. She shows that, through meditative discipline, monastics gain experiential insight into the Buddhist truths of impermanence, suffering, and non-self. Comparatively, in Myanmar, the meditation movement transformed lay people's responses to the totalitarian regime and posed a challenge to the military dictatorship (Jordt 2007). Distinctive practices of self-cultivation and their relationship to new Buddhist organisations are also reflected in the Taiwanese Fo Guang Shan, who hold short-term monastic retreats for lay people who want to commit themselves to periods of intensive cultivation (Laidlaw & Mair 2019). In Europe and America, Buddhism has increasingly been framed in a universal and psychological register, and meditation is increasingly interpreted as a method for psychological development. For example, mindfulness, an awareness training practice originating in Buddhism, has become the basis for psychological interventions in non-Buddhist contexts, verified through rigorous scientific testing. Participants in mindfulness-based therapeutic interventions cultivate metacognitive awareness in order to support their mental health (Cook 2015). Comparatively, understandings of mindfulness in Asia are linked to local constructions of emotion and selfhood (Cassaniti 2018).

Conclusion

This entry has identified some key themes that have attracted anthropological attention in the study of Buddhism. On the one hand, anthropological exploration has challenged the idea that Buddhism constitutes a somewhat homogenous 'world religion'. Since the 1960s, there has been significant scholarship on the different forms that Buddhism takes and its place in social life. And, since the 1990s, anthropological works have been characterised by a multiplicity of approaches and themes to reflect the diversity, transformation, and debate that marks the Buddhist world. As part of this work, anthropologists have challenged the tenet that Buddhism is best studied by focusing on texts alone. Instead, they have highlighted the importance of living settings and an engagement with Buddhist texts in context. At the same time, anthropology's ethnographic and comparative approach to the religion has shown that Buddhist practices are being

brought together in a world increasingly shaped by digital communication – at times creating feelings of a global monastic community, not too dissimilar to feelings of a global community (*ummah*) in Islamic contexts.

Buddhist ethnographic and historical materials have also enriched wider anthropological debates. Most importantly, non-Buddhist anthropologists have increasingly collaborated with scholars from Buddhist contexts and from other disciplines. Anthropological work has thus increasingly been produced in dialogue and collaboration with a polyphony of voices, political movements, and religious communities in Buddhist countries. As such, enriched and re-shaped by multiple vantage points, scholarly engagement has scrutinised the assumptions that have underpinned the very idea of an anthropology of Buddhism as a project – reflecting a critical shift from an 'anthropology of' to an 'anthropology with' as a collaborative endeavour.

References

Abrahms-Kavunenko, S. 2019 *Enlightenment and the gasping city: Mongolian Buddhism at a time of environmental disarray*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Allen, C. 2003. *The Buddha and the sahibs: the men who discovered India's lost religion*. London: John Murray.

Bailey, G. & I. Mabbett 2003. *The sociology of early Buddhism*. Cambridge: University Press.

Barrett, T. 2008. *The woman who discovered printing*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Bechert, H., E. Lamotte & R. Gombrich (eds) 1984. *The world of Buddhism*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Borchert, T.A. 2017. *Educating monks: minority Buddhism on China's southwest border*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Bubandt, N. & M. Van Beek 2011. *Varieties of secularism in Asia: anthropological explorations of religion, politics and the spiritual*. London: Routledge.

Caple, J.E. 2019. *Morality and monastic revival in post-Mao Tibet*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Cassiniti, J. 2018. *Remembering the present: mindfulness in Buddhist Asia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Carrithers, M. 1984. The domestication of the Sangha. *Man* **19**, 321-2.

Chandler, S. 2004. *Establishing a pure land on Earth: the Foguang Buddhist perspective on modernization and globalization*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Cook, J. 2010. *Meditation in modern Buddhism: renunciation and change in Thai monastic life*. Cambridge: University Press.

——— 2015. Detachment and engagement in mindfulness-based cognitive therapy. In *Detachment: essays on the limits of relational thinking* (eds) M. Candea, J. Cook, C. Trundle & T. Yarrow, 219-35. Manchester: University Press.

——— 2018. Remaking Thai Buddhism through international pilgrimage to South Asia. In *Religious journeys in India: pilgrims, tourists, and travellers* (eds) A.M. Pinkney & J. Whalen-Bridge, 37-64. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Covell, S.G. 2005. *Japanese temple Buddhism: worldliness in a religion of renunciation*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Diemberger, H. 2007. *When a woman becomes a religious dynasty: The Samding Dorje Phagmo of Tibet*. New York: Columbia University Press.

——— 2014. Tibetan Buddhist books in a digital age. In *Globalization and the making of religious modernity in China: transnational religions, local agents, and the study of religion, 1800-present* (eds) T. Jansen, T. Klein & C. Meyer, 208-32. Leiden: Brill Publishing.

———, F.K. Ehrhard & P. Kornicki (eds) 2016. *Tibetan printing: comparisons, continuities and change*. Brill's Tibetan studies library, volume 39. Leiden: Brill Publishing.

Frauwallner, E. 2010 [1956]. *The philosophy of Buddhism*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Fisher, G. 2014. *From comrades to bodhisattvas: moral dimensions of lay Buddhist practice in contemporary China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Frydenlund, I. 2016. Particularist goals through universalist means: the political paradoxes of Buddhist revivalism in Sri Lanka. In *Buddhism and the political process* (ed.) H. Kawanami, 97-120. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

——— 2017. 'Buddhism has made Asia mild': the modernist construction of Buddhism as pacifism. In *Buddhist modernities: re-inventing tradition in the globalizing modern world* (eds) H. Havnevik, U. Hüsken, M. Teeuwen, V. Tikhonov & K. Wellens, 204-21. New York: Routledge.

Geary, D. 2017. *The rebirth of Bodh Gaya: Buddhism and the making of a world heritage site*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Gellner, D.N. 1992. *Monk, householder, and tantric priest: Newar Buddhism and its hierarchy of ritual*. Cambridge studies in social and cultural anthropology 84. Cambridge: University Press.

——— 2001. *The anthropology of Buddhism and Hinduism: Weberian themes*. Oxford: University Press.

Gombrich, R.F. 1971. *Precept and practice: traditional Buddhism in the rural highlands of Ceylon*. Oxford: University Press.

——— 1995. *Buddhist precept and practice* (new ed.). London: Routledge.

——— 2009. *What the Buddha taught*. London: Equinox Publishing.

——— & G. Obeyesekere 1988. *Buddhism transformed: religious change in Sri Lanka*. Princeton: University Press.

Grimshaw, A. 1992. *Servants of the Buddha: winter in a Himalayan convent*. London: Open Letter.

Gutschow, K. 2004. *Being a Buddhist nun: the struggle for enlightenment in the Himalayas*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Gyatso, J. 1998. *Apparitions of the self: the secret autobiographies of a Tibetan visionary*. Princeton: University Press.

——— & H. Havnevik (eds) 2005. *Women in Tibet*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hallisey, C. 2014. Roads taken and not taken in the study of Theravāda Buddhism. In *Defining Buddhism(s)* (eds) K. Derris & N. Gummer, 92-117. New York: Routledge.

Huber, T. 1994. Why can't women climb Pure Crystal Mountain? Remarks on gender ritual and space in Tsa-Ri. In *Tibetan studies: proceedings of the 6th seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies* (ed.) P. Kvaerne, 350-71. Oslo: The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture.

Humphrey, C. & H. Ujeed 2013. A monastery in time: the making of Mongolian Buddhism. Chicago: University Press.

Jackson, P.A. 2003. *Buddhadasa: Theravada Buddhism and modernist reform in Thailand*. Bangkok: Silkworm Books.

Jerryson, M. & M. Juergensmeyer 2010. *Buddhist warfare*. Oxford: University Press.

Jordt, I. 2007. *Burma's mass lay meditation movement: Buddhism and the cultural construction of power*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

Kawanami, H. (ed.) 2016. *Buddhism and the political process*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Klima, A. 2002. *The funeral casino: meditation, massacre, and exchange with the dead in Thailand*. Princeton: University Press.

Ladwig, P. 2012. Visitors from hell: transformative hospitality to ghosts in a Lao Buddhist festival. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* **18**(1) Special Issue: The Return to Hospitality: Strangers, Guests, and Ambiguous Encounters, S90-S102.

——— & J. Williams (eds) 2012. *Buddhist funeral cultures of Southeast Asia and China*. Cambridge: University Press.

Laidlaw, J. & J. Mair 2019. Imperfect accomplishment: The Fo Guang Shan short-term monastic retreat and ethical pedagogy in humanistic Buddhism. *Cultural Anthropology* **34**(3), 328-58.

Learman, L. 2005. *Buddhist missionaries in the era of globalization*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Lekshe Tsomo, K. (ed.) 2008. *Buddhist women in a global multicultural community: The 9th Sakyadhita International Conference*. Petalying Jaya, Malaysia: Sukhi Hotu Dhamma Publications (available on-line: https://sakyadhita.org/docs/resources/epublications/BuddhistWomenInAMulticulturalCommunity-Sakyadhita2009.pdf).

LeVine, S. & D.N. Gellner 2005. *Rebuilding Buddhism: the Theravada movement in twentieth-century Nepal*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Lopes, Ana Cristina. 2015. *Tibetan Buddhism in diaspora: cultural re-signification in practice and institutions*. London: Routledge.

Lopez, D. 1998. *Prisoners of Shangri-la: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*. Chicago: University Press.

Madsen, R. 2007. *Democracy's dharma: religious renaissance and political development in Taiwan*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Makley, C. 1999. Gendered practices and the inner sanctum: the reconstruction of Tibetan sacred space in 'China's Tibet'. In *Sacred spaces and powerful places in Tibetan culture* (ed.) T. Huber, 343-66. Dharamasala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives.

Masuzawa, T. 2005. *The invention of world religions* (Introduction and Chapter 4). Chicago: University Press.

McDaniel, J. 2011. *The lovelorn ghost and the magical monk: practicing Buddhism in modern Thailand*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Miller, J., D. Smyer Yu & P. van Veer 2014. *Religion and ecological sustainability in China.* London: Routledge

Mills, M.A. 2003. *Identity, ritual and state in Tibetan Buddhism: the foundations of authority in Gelukpa*

monasticism. London: RoutledgeCurzon.

Mumford, S.R. 1989. *Himalayan dialogue: Tibetan lamas and Gurung shamans in Nepa*l. New York: MacMillan

Ortner, S. 1978. *Sherpas through their rituals*. Cambridge: University Press.

Pattana, K. 2005. Beyond syncretism: hybridisation of popular religion in contemporary Thailand. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* **36**(3), 461-87.

Pittman, D.A. 2001. *Toward a modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu's reforms*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Queen, C.S. & S.B. King 1996. *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist liberation movements in Asia*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Raghavan, S. 2016. *Buddhist monks and the politics of Lanka's civil war: ethnoreligious nationalism of the Sinhala Sangha and peacemaking in Sri Lanka, 1995–2010.* London: Equinox.

Reader, I. & G.J. Tanabe Jr. 1998. *Practically religious: worldly benefits and the common religion of Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Rowe, M.M. 2011. *Bonds of the dead: temples, burial, and the transformation of contemporary Japanese Buddhism*. Chicago: University Press.

Ruegg, D.S. 1995 *Ordre spirituel et ordre temporel dans la pensée bouddhique de l'Inde et du Tibet.* Public. de l'Institut de civilisation indienne, 64. Paris: Collège de France.

Said, E. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Samuel, G. 1993. *Civilised shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan societies*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution.

Samuels, J. 2010. *Attracting the heart: social relations and the aesthetics of emotion in Sri Lankan monastic culture*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Schopen, G. 2004. *Buddhist monks and business matters: still more papers on monastic business in India*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

——— 2014. *Buddhist nuns, monks, and other worldly matters.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Scott, D. 1994 *Formations of ritual: colonial and anthropological discourses on the Sinhala Yaktovil.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Scott, R.M. 2009. *Nirvana for sale? Buddhism, wealth, and the Dhammakāya temple in contemporary*

Thailand. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Seeger, M. 2018. *Gender and the path to awakening: hidden histories of nuns in modern Thai Buddhism*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.

Seneviratne, H.L. 1999. *The work of kings: the new Buddhism in Sri Lanka*. Chicago: University Press.

Sihlé, N. 2015. Introduction: the comparative anthropology of the Buddhist gift. *Religion Compass* **9**(11), 347-51.

Simpson, B. 2004. Impossible gifts: bodies, Buddhism and bioethics in contemporary Sri Lanka. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* **10**(4), 839-59.

Southwold, M. 1982. True Buddhism and village Buddhism in Sri Lanka. In *Religious organisation and religious experience* (ed.) J Davis, 137-152. New York: Academic Press

Sneath, D. 2014. Nationalising civilisational resources: sacred mountains and cosmopolitical ritual in Mongolia. *Asian Ethnicity* **15**(4), 458-72.

Spiro, M.E. 1982 [1970]. *Buddhism and society: a great tradition and its Burmese vicissitudes*. Berkley: University of California Press.

Soucy, A. 2015. *The Buddha side: gender, power, and Buddhist practice in Vietnam*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Southwold, M. 1983. *Buddhism in life: the anthropological study of religion and the Sinhalese practice of Buddhism*. Manchester: University Press.

Strenski, I. 1983. On generalized exchange and the domestication of the Sangha. *Man* **18**, 463-77.

Strong, J. 2004. *Relics of the Buddha*. Princeton: University Press.

Tambiah, S.J. 1970. *Buddhism and the spirit cults in northeast Thailand*. Cambridge: University Press.

——— 1976. *World conqueror and world renouncer*. Cambridge: University Press.

——— 1984. *The Buddhist saints of the forest and the cult of amulets: a study in charisma, hagiography, sectarianism, and millennial Buddhism*. Cambridge: University Press.

Tanabe, S. 1991. Spirits, power, and the discourse of female gender: the Phi Meng cult of Northern Thailand. In *Thai constructions of knowledge* (eds) M. Chitakasem & A. Turton, 183-212. London: School of Oriental and African Studies.

Terwiel, B.J. 1975. Monks and magic: an analysis of religious ceremonies in Central Thailand. London:

Curzon Press.

Tikhonov, V. & T. Brekke 2013. *Buddhism and violence: militarism and Buddhism in modern Asia*. New York: Routledge.

Tsedroen, J. (Carola Roloff) 2008. Generation to generation: transmitting the Bhiksuni lineage in the Tibetan tradition. In *Buddhist women in a global multicultural community: The 9th Sakyadhita International Conference* (ed.) K. Lekshe Tsomo, K, 210-5. Petalying Jaya, Malaysia: Sukhi Hotu Dhamma Publications (available on-line: https://sakyadhita.org/docs/resources/epublications/BuddhistWomenInAMulticulturalCommunity-Sakyadhita2009.pdf).

Tshering, S. 1999. *The dragon in the land of snow*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Van Esterik, J.L. 1977. *Cultural interpretation of canonical paradox: lay meditation in a central Thai village.* PhD thesis, University of Illinois, Chicago.

Walton, M.J. 2016. *Buddhism, politics, and political thought in Myanmar*. Cambridge: University Press.

Note on contributors

Joanna Cook is a Reader in Anthropology at University College London. Her current research focuses on mindfulness, mental health, and governance in the UK. She is the author of *Meditation in modern Buddhism: renunciation and change in Thai monastic life* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) and the co-editor of *Unsettling anthropologies of care* (Anthropology and Humanism, 2020), *The state we're in: reflecting on democracy's troubles* (Berghan Books, 2016), *Detachment: essays on the limits of relational thinking* (Manchester University Press, 2015) and *Southeast Asian perspectives on power* (Routledge, 2012).

Dr Joanna Cook, Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Social & Historical Sciences, University College London, Gower Street, London, WC1E 6BT, United Kingdom. joanna.cook@ucl.ac.uk

Hildegard Diemberger is Research Director of Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit (MIASU) at University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Pembroke College. Trained as a social anthropologist and Tibetologist at Vienna University, she has published numerous books and articles on the anthropology and the history of Tibet and the Himalaya as well as on the Tibetan-Mongolian interface, including the monograph *When a woman becomes a religious dynasty: the Samding Dorje Phagmo of Tibet* (Columbia University Press, 2007), the edited volume *Tibetan printing – comparisons, continuities and change* (Brill, 2016), the exhibition catalogue *Buddha's word – the life of books in Tibet and beyond*, Museum of Archaeology and

 ISSN 2398-516X

Anthropology, University of Cambridge (2013-2014), and the English translation of two manuscripts on the Buddhist history of Tibet, the *dBa' bzhed* and the *Shel dkar chos 'byung* (Austrian Academy of Science 1996, 2000).

Dr Hildegard Diemberger, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge, Free School Lane, Cambridge CB2 3RF, United Kingdom. hgmd2@cam.ac.uk

---

[1] See, for example, Keown 2013 for a brief overview; Schopen 2014 for discussions related to practical issues of early Buddhist monastic life; Gombrich 2009 on the development of early teachings; and Frauwallner 2010 [1956] for an overview of the classical philosophical debates.

[2] See, for example, the work of Austine Waddell, Giuseppe Tucci, and other prominent orientalists.

 ISSN 2398-516X